

Common Behaviors and Supports for Successful Online Learning

By

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Abstract

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate student behaviors when they transition to an online school at a selected school in Northeast Tennessee. This study aimed to determine specific behaviors that successful and unsuccessful online students showed when they first came to an online setting. In addition, it aimed to discover specific supports online schools can provide to increase student success in online schools. The sample consisted of 9 current or recently graduated students from the same online school in Tennessee at 10th grade or above. Data were collected using four focus group conversations where the participants were assigned different groups based on previous in-person TNReady assessments scores. Data were analyzed using Merriam & Tisdell's (2016) step-by-step process: "naming the categories, determining the number of categories, and figuring out systems for placing data into categories" (p. 236). Common themes came from this process: (1) external student behaviors, (2) internal student behaviors, (3) family qualities, and (4) school qualities. These themes provide valuable information and feedback for current online schools and higher education in situations where students have never taken an online course. This study concludes that there are specific behaviors where online students are successful when coming from an in-person school. In addition, there are specific supports that online schools and teachers can utilize for new students. Future research should include qualitative studies on specific time management and self-discipline skills students use while learning online. Also, more qualitative data from the families and teachers on online learning could be beneficial since this study focused on student perspectives.

Keywords: online learning, self-regulated learning, successful online learning behaviors, asynchronous, online student supports

Dedication

This is dedicated to my beautiful wife, Sumer. You have been patient, kind, and encouraged me throughout all my journeys, and this one is no different. Thank you for your prayers and unwavering support. Without you, none of this would be possible. I love you more than you know. Though I will never be able to make up time missed with you and our children, I know God's plan for our lives will continue to grow and flourish.

To my daughters, it is critical to remember that learning is essential because it encompasses every aspect of life. Learning how to self-reflect, set goals, improve relationships, develop positive mindsets, etc., is critical. However, learning to love God and others diligently will have the greatest return on your life. Our family mission is always to show the love of God to others, and in doing so, we learn more about ourselves and what we are truly capable of. Always maintain the desire to learn continuously and influence this world for Christ in every facet of life.

To my parents, brothers, in-laws, and grandparents, thank you for your support and encouragement. If I did not have a solid foundation in Christ, I would not be where I am today. Each of you plays an imperative part in my story, and even though this chapter of my life is over, I look forward to the upcoming chapters with each of you.

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Chapter 1

Online learning is not a new educational theory or a different learning medium. It is a form of distance learning that began to materialize and increase in popularity since the growth and advancement of the modern internet in the 1990s (Snow & Coker, 2020). Still, even before this, with the post office, radio, and television, individuals utilized distance learning from the mid-nineteenth century to the late twentieth century (Kentnor, 2015; Snow & Coker, 2020). By the beginning of the twenty-first century, online education emerged as the mainstream form of distance learning, even though it is vastly different from what exists today (Kentnor, 2015). It started as distance education or E-learning and slowly transitioned to virtual classrooms utilizing video-conferencing software. As technology and the internet improved in capacity, online learning began to evolve and continues to this day (Kentnor, 2015). At the beginning of distance or E-learning, students could receive instruction from teachers by recording themselves online, making copies of presentations, or PDF document notes. Students would then complete assignments, scan them to their computer, and send them back to the instructor or submit them in a learning management system. One of the only times students were needed to come in for class would be to take a test or exam. However, if students could learn without having to go to class multiple times throughout the week, it would give them the flexibility and convenience to do other things outside school. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, when schools were forced to go online, students could learn in various ways (Pregowska et al., 2021). Now, students and teachers can connect worldwide because of technological advancements, whether through live synchronous classes or asynchronous assignments completed independently.

Black et al. (2020) describe virtual learning as “the delivery of instruction through technology to students physically separated from their teachers” (para. 3). Today, there are

numerous online or virtual K-12 schools where students and families can learn wherever they live or are located. There are various private, public, and homeschool online platforms for students in all grade levels. Data from the 2019-2020 school year shows that over 290,000 students in the United States attend a virtual school full-time. Over 4.7 million students are enrolled virtually in at least a part-time status (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019).

In Tennessee, as of the 2022-2023 school year, there are fifty-seven virtual public schools with a state school number (TDOE, 2022). In addition, numerous private, charter, and homeschool programs exist online. Some of this is due to the COVID-19 pandemic when many schools had to continue instruction in an online format, but there was an upward trend of families wanting their students to attend virtual schools before this time. Statistics indicate that online schooling is here to stay and is increasing in number (Wood, 2022). Also, colleges and universities offer many online courses or programs. A student will likely take an online class in grades K-12 or higher.

Each virtual or online school is structured differently and can vary from school to school. For instance, some online schools utilize a computerized curriculum where most assessments are automated and graded quickly after a student completes them. Other schools are more personalized and have state-certified teachers to design and give feedback. Other virtual schools function like brick-and-mortar schools where students and teachers spend time together in a live class on a platform such as Zoom or Google Meet. Online schools can be divided into three basic types: synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid (Johnson, 2022). Synchronous instruction means that the student and the teacher are on the computer simultaneously and, more than likely, on a videoconferencing program where they can talk to one another. In other words, there is a specific time that the students must log in to be online at the same time as the teacher. Power & Gould-

Morven (2011) describe this model as BOLD, where it is a blend of synchronous live classes and the use of an LMS to turn in assignments. An asynchronous online learning environment utilizes an LMS to complete every aspect of learning. Most of the assignments are to be done when it is convenient for the students, and there is no specific time for students to log in during the day and complete tasks. There may be due dates, but students and families have the flexibility to work when there is an opportunity. The hybrid or semi-synchronous model is a mixture of the two. There are live class opportunities for the students, or they may be able to come in person if they live nearby, in addition to asynchronous work throughout the week. Either way, every virtual school is set up differently based on their thoughts or beliefs on student learning. Some entities focus on education entirely as a business. To some entities, online learning is a billion-dollar industry, whether for-profit colleges, public schools, or private companies (Straits Research, 2022). There is a delicate balance for students and families between finding an online school that works for them and one where the purpose is to provide a high-quality online learning environment. With all the varying instructional models and visions for online learning, families must determine which online learning is best for the student.

Even though choosing the online instructional method is critical for student success, families decide to go the online route for myriad reasons. Stark (2019) argues that online learning is an option for students of any age who need flexibility or a socially safe environment (p. 235). The flexibility online learning provides is optimal for students pursuing passions such as athletics, hobbies, or artistic activities outside the typical school day. These individuals and families enjoy the asynchronous opportunity to learn when they have the time during the week, compared to being online or in person at a specific moment. Other families want to avoid dealing with the social environment for different reasons and prefer a synchronous or

asynchronous learning method. This allows the families to control the student's learning environment more than the student being in a large group setting. Black et al. (2020) note that virtual learning is not for everyone because "individuals need to be motivated, organized, and supported" (para. 5). The amount of support and dedication schools provide are essential for families to research before transitioning to online learning. These varying types lend themselves to meeting the specific needs of diverse families and students.

Apart from the situations and circumstances that thrust students to consider an online school, there are academic competencies that students develop to encourage families to switch from traditional schooling. Wong et al. (2019) point out that successful online students become better self-regulated learners, which means the students take the initiative and responsibility in the learning process. Becoming independent learners, where students can read, watch, and complete assignments without a teacher guiding them through every step is a learned skill. In an asynchronous setting, the teachers primarily act as a facilitator of student learning. The material and curriculum are designed in an LMS, and the students ask for help as needed. In a synchronous setting, the teachers meet daily or throughout the week with students to do more for them. In either case, there are times when teachers are not available in the evening hours or after regular school time. This means the students and families must develop self-regulated learning techniques to complete the required coursework for the class. This is like a student attending in-person school. When students have homework to complete outside of the classroom, they must be able to complete assignments on their own time. Also, motivation is a factor in successful online students. The families influence part of the student motivation by supporting and encouraging students, but how the curriculum is organized and presented is also critical. Sansone et al. (2011) note that "incorporating students' motivational backgrounds may also be key for

optimizing learning online” (p. 210). If teachers personalize their courses by allowing student interests or choices in showcasing learning, students can be more successful. Overall, the previously mentioned skills and behaviors are critical for students after high school, whether for post-secondary education or a career. Students and families choose to attend an online school because it can provide them with more valuable experiences later in life.

As seen during the pandemic, there are also challenges to online learning. The advantages can entice students and families to transition, but with each of the positives, some challenges present themselves. First, there are the natural and expected complications of access to the internet, technology, and student devices. However, other difficulties arise if online learning is new to teachers, students, families, and schools. The structure and outline of online courses can be different from in-person lessons. Teachers and virtual schools are responsible for ensuring that the design and delivery of online content match the learning methodology. Online teachers must also be responsive and communicate frequently. As Deng & Sun (2022) note, teachers must “improve the frequency of instructor-student communication and effectiveness of online communications” (p. 85). In addition, parental or family involvement is critical, no matter the age of the students. Ricker et al. (2021) acknowledge that there is a “significant relationship in student performance across the elementary, middle, and high school band” with parent involvement (p. 197). Finally, even with the advantages of online learning, negative consequences can arise. “Flexibility can also wreak havoc with managing time wisely” (Hendrickson, Degreenia, & Bruce, p. 13, 2021). Negative consequences could exist if students are too free to complete assignments independently. Some need the more direct presence of an adult to function at a high level. This could be a teacher or a family member. Nevertheless, there are always students who can manage their time at a young age. Regardless of the type of school,

student success is the priority despite prior experiences. Determining and developing specific behaviors or skills can help future students succeed in online learning.

Statement of the Problem

K-12 online schools continue to increase in popularity due partly to the COVID-19 pandemic in the spring of 2020 and the following year. In addition, many families discovered they enjoy the flexibility and ability to work at home with their children (Black et al., 2020). Nevertheless, students, families, teachers, and schools had a difficult learning curve. Few were ready for online learning for various reasons, but overall, everyone attempted to function like an in-person school. Online learning is a two-way endeavor where the students and teachers have specific roles. As Hendrickson, Degreenia, & Bruce (2021) points out, “Instructors had a large external impact on students as they were left to make quick decisions on how to deliver courses and implement teaching strategies” (p. 11). Even though this thought concerns educators immediately going to an online learning environment, it exemplifies that teachers are critical in creating and managing students in online courses. As more families prefer to go online, it could benefit schools and families to know what skills or traits students need to transition to virtual schools easier. Moving to an online environment could prevent students from learning without those skills.

Now, families and students choose to learn online for various reasons. However, transitioning from in-person to online learning can be challenging. One decision is the type of virtual school to join because there are more and more to choose from in today’s K-12 setting. If a student chooses an asynchronous school, there are more difficulties due to less teacher contact than in synchronous or hybrid learning courses. Synchronous and hybrid/blended online schools also have difficulties, but more problems and frustrations arise with less teacher interaction.

Khanlarian & Singh (2014) note, “Frustration plays a significant role in students who report less success” (p. 142). This frustration comes from a lack of the skills necessary to be a successful online student.

All students will not be successful in an online learning environment. However, there are things that students and families must have or be aware of to succeed. Students who have already transitioned to online schools would be ideal for telling their reasoning for being successful or unsuccessful online students. As more and more K-12 in-person students transition to virtual schools, it is essential for there to be more data on this transition from in-person to online instruction. Only some students have demonstrated success as online learners, but this research study intended to examine students' different behaviors and skills when transitioning from in-person to online. It focused on students in an asynchronous, online learning environment in grades nine through twelve.

Purpose of the Study

This study investigated ways students can succeed when transitioning from an in-person learning environment to an asynchronous online learning environment. Despite the type of virtual school the student attends, these skills and competencies exhibited by successful students can benefit all stakeholders in online learning. If there are a few defining characteristics that new virtual students can incorporate into their learning, it could allow other students to show more growth and progress. In addition, students shared their thoughts and opinions about their learning process when changing their learning modality. Obtaining this qualitative data from students in grades nine through twelve unveiled personal and realistic information to help improve virtual learning for all students. These ideas can benefit future online students, teachers, and online schools. It can, most importantly, prepare students and families to transition to a virtual school.

Despite the differences in virtual schools, all schools must find ways for students to be successful, regardless of their educational background or prior experience.

School leaders can benefit from the information in the study to design safeguards and processes for incoming new students. Being acutely aware of the specific areas students struggle or excel at benefits the school by preparing a plan for all new students. Without it, students could succeed in their learning or leave the virtual school because of a lack of clarity and frustration. Virtual schools have a specific responsibility to onboard and retain new students, but they must know how to best set them up for success when they come to them. Even though all students are different, this study found defining characteristics of successful and unsuccessful online learners.

Research Questions

What behaviors do students need to transition from in-person to online learning successfully?

What supports can help increase students' likelihood of success in an online environment?

Significance of the Study

There needs to be more research on K-12 online learning. Most research examines the COVID-19 pandemic and the quick transition to online learning, while others focus on higher education. Since K-12 online learning is growing in popularity, this study is relevant for all virtual schools. Barbour (2010) notes about future K-12 online learning research:

Moving beyond comparisons of student performance to investigate issues related to the effective design and delivery of K-12 online learning, how best to support K-12 online learners, both within the online environment and at the local school level, and understanding the experience of the lower performing or at-risk learner to improve their chances of success in the online environment (p. 11).

This study intended to discover ways to help students be successful learners in an online environment. When students move to an online school, this information can benefit students, families, parents, teachers, and other online schools. This transition can be complex if students and families are unfamiliar with learning in a virtual setting. Allowing all stakeholders to know successful traits or behaviors before the change to an online school will enable students to stay in an online setting and ultimately be successful. Online schools can use the findings from this study to prepare incoming students and families for the expectations necessary to thrive in this environment. The more communication of positive actions students and families can do to prepare for an online school, the more possibility of students having a chance to stay at the online school.

B. Smith (2010) found that the attrition rate in higher education online programs is 10-20% more than in traditional classrooms. This means the overall rate ranges anywhere from 40-80%. The percentage must increase by building student and family capacity for online learning. It can also benefit higher education when managing incoming students. Most schools in higher education offer online courses, and this information is pertinent for new students who may need to gain experience in online learning. In addition, the focus is on high school students in grades nine through twelve, which can immediately impact higher education online courses.

Ensuring students and families are aware of the expectations in online courses in K-12 or higher education can help retain students in an online setting and enable them to succeed earlier than usual. This transition time when they first start an online school always requires more effort from students and families. Additionally, it can be a very frustrating time for everyone involved, and they begin to question their transition or whether they can learn online. Specifically, in a high school and higher education setting, student GPA is an area that could suffer when students first take an online course. Communicating these behaviors and supports necessary for online learning on a one-page document or through intentional conversations could help prepare, retain, and enable students to be successful online learners while providing specific support online schools can utilize.

Definition of Terms

The following terms were used in this study. The researcher has defined terms not cited.

Online or distance or e-learning: Online learning has transitioned from distance learning or e-learning. These types of education started differently two decades ago, but now, distance learning is entirely online. As Johnson (2021) reports, these terms all resemble the same information but at different times. Overall, these terms signify learning that the student is completing remotely or not on a specific campus.

Asynchronous: Online learning where students can complete assignments independently on their own time. This type of online learning can occur either by weekly, monthly, or quarterly due dates. However, some occurrences, such as MOOCs (Massive Open Online Courses), are free asynchronous courses without an end or due date.

Synchronous: Online learning where students access the curriculum and discuss content simultaneously with teachers and classmates. This method utilizes a virtual video platform like Zoom, Google Meet, or other live video conferencing programs.

Semi-synchronous or blended, or hybrid learning: A blend of online and in-person or synchronous and asynchronous times. Johnson (2021) notes that hybrid learning connotes various combinations of in-person and online learning, as it needs to be clarified.

Brick-and-mortar or in-person school: An in-person school is a physical or geographical campus with the typical bell schedule, class changes, and lunch provided by the school where student learning occurs throughout the school year. Students are expected to meet the requirements regarding attendance and mandated assessments. Students are assigned a class where a certified educator teaches the state standards and a board-approved curriculum. There may be opportunities for students to learn in a blended setting where assignments and assessments are online in an LMS. However, there are face-to-face interactions between students and teachers. In-person learning is how most K-12 students attend school, either in public, private, or charter school settings.

Online or virtual school: An online or virtual school does not have physical classrooms or a campus where students attend daily. There are no face-to-face interactions between students and teachers, but it is possible in a hybrid setting. The online school can be public, private, or charter school. In either scenario, online schools function like in-person schools without physical interactions between students and teachers. However, the interactions are via email, video conferencing software, or another digital platform. Depending on how the school is structured, students and families enrolled in the same virtual school can live nearby or not. The

same accountability and expectations are required if the school is a public online school. Private online schools can function according to their own governing body.

Facilitator: An instance where teachers are there to support and guide students in their learning. The teacher is not doing the cognitive lift; the students must think and reflect. In most cases, the teacher presents or teaches the material, then guides or facilitates the student's learning. In online asynchronous classes, the teacher acts as a facilitator by organizing the content in a meaningful and scaffolded manner to give the students the best opportunity to learn, which includes the teacher's use of discussion boards or recorded video discussions. The teacher is not directing the student's every move but gives help and assistance as needed. Some students will not need as much support as others when teachers are facilitators.

TVAAS: Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System. The state of Tennessee uses this system for school/district accountability in addition to tracking teacher effectiveness regarding student growth. The Tennessee Department of Education (n.d.) notes that TVAAS “measures student growth year over year, regardless of whether the student is proficient on the state assessment. In calculating a TVAAS score, a student’s performance is compared to their peers who have performed similarly on past assessments.”

Learning Management System: Abbreviated as LMS, a learning management system is a web-based digital program that acts as a digital classroom. It allows teachers to post assignments for students to complete, videos for instruction, or any other types of information needed for students to be able to keep up with their progress. In most cases, the LMS allows teachers to grade and give feedback to students. Overall, it imitates a virtual classroom where everything is distributed and collected.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited in various areas. One was by only focusing on the focus group conversations and the differences in explained behaviors between the participants. No other data were collected from them. In addition, there were only nine participants from the same online school with a total enrollment of around 250 students. This study only focused on students in grades 9-12 and had no participants younger than 10th grade. The participants comprised four females, five males, and one student with a 504 plan, but none had an IEP. In some areas, diverse groups were represented, but not in others. The school is in Northeast Tennessee, but the participants are located across the state. However, this is one region and does not represent all online schools. Finally, the online school the participants attended was a mostly asynchronous school with weekly due dates. Virtual schools can be structured differently, but this study focused on the student experiences at a single school.

Organization of the Study

Chapter 1 introduces online/virtual schools and the study, followed by a statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, an overarching research question, the significance of the study, a list of definitions, and an outline of the limitations of the study. Chapter 2 includes an appropriate literature review of recent studies and research on successful online learning skills. Next, it is divided into multiple sections that include the following: Chapter 3 presents the qualitative procedures and methodology utilized to complete the study. The results are analyzed and outlined in Chapter 4. Finally, Chapter 5 provides the study's conclusion with an overall summary of findings, conclusions, discussion, successful behaviors and supports in online learning, and suggestions for future research.

Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

This research intends to investigate the habits and behaviors students need when transitioning from an in-person school to an online or virtual school. Therefore, Chapter Two of this study aims to review successful online learning thoroughly and the various roles stakeholders play in setting students up for success. It is organized into four main sections: an introduction to online education, online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic, the roles of students, teachers, and families, and the challenges of online learning.

Introduction to Online Learning

Online learning has been around for decades, but it has been named under a few different terms, such as E-Learning, distance learning, or virtual learning (Kentnor, 2015, p. 22). Since the introduction of the printing press, individuals have been able to learn at any time and location if they could read in the language a text was written (Pregowska et al. 2021). People can learn wherever they reside by reading printed information, such as newspapers, books, magazines, or other informative texts (Snow & Coker, 2020, p. 42). However, the issue was access to these materials since they were only available simultaneously if there were multiple copies. Then, by adding the post office and mail, people could send learning materials to others worldwide (Kentnor, 2015, p. 23). Following this, the radio and sound recordings were opportunities to teach others about various topics within a certain distance (Snow & Coker, 2020, p. 42; Kentor, 2015, p. 24). Distance learning has grown exponentially in the last few decades with technological advancements such as the television, computer, and the modern internet. As time progresses, anyone can connect to others worldwide and access an infinite amount of information

on various devices. Online learning is the current form of distance learning; as technology changes, learning online will also continue to change. Currently, students have access to information that was impossible a few decades ago. However, the challenge for individuals and schools is positively using the information available.

Black et al. (2020) describe virtual learning as “the delivery of instruction through technology to students physically separated from their teachers” (para. 3). Within the context of virtual learning, there are also various styles of online or distance learning that include synchronous, asynchronous, and hybrid or blended learning (Johnson, Seaman, & Poulin, 2022). Synchronous learning is what many schools tried to do during the pandemic by having live classes through Zoom, Google Meet, Microsoft Teams, or other technology tools (p. 103). Asynchronous learning is when students do not have any live courses, and the instruction is through videos, discussions, and students submitting work in the LMS or through email (p. 104). Finally, hybrid learning consists of synchronous and asynchronous, where students have in-person and online interactions with their classmates (p. 100). These online instructional styles were used at various times throughout the pandemic but are challenging to implement quickly. For the most part, when online learning first came about, it was mainly asynchronous because the technology capabilities were not there in the 1990s, and materials were sent by mail or email (Snow & Coker, 2020, p.51). Once the technology became more available, students and teachers could discuss and learn in different geographical locations (Kentnor, 2015, p. 30). However, this was more prevalent in college and university settings. Now, online learning is used for students of any age who need flexibility or a socially safe environment (Stark, p. 235, 2019).

Barbour & Reeves (2009) point out that most research on K-12 online learning deals with two main areas: the benefits of online learning and the potential challenges of online learning.

These benefits of virtual schooling include the following: (1) expanded educational access, (2) high-quality learning opportunities, and (3) allowing educational choice (p. 407). Public schools, private schools, and even homeschooled students can use online school opportunities.

Online Learning During COVID-19

Nearly fifty million K-12 students had to complete the Spring 2020 semester either in an online learning environment or an actual distance learning format due to shutdowns caused by the COVID-19 pandemic (Zviedrite et al., 2021). For teachers, according to Akokie, Laroche, & Schumacher (2020), they had to adjust their curriculum, instruction, and assessment methods to include a learning management system (LMS), how to record videos for students, and some quick resources to help navigate instruction (p. 68). However, according to An et al. (2021), most teachers felt prepared to teach online, at least for the short term. The first hurdle to online learning for students was accessing the internet (Kaden, 2020). Once this seemed possible, the students who could access quality internet had to learn how to log in to a device, where to access the instruction or assignments, and how to use the LMS. More likely than not, families needed to learn as much as the students how to learn online (Akokie, Laroche, & Schumacher, 2020). However, it was understandable since few had experienced this before, and no one knew how long this learning would last. Teachers, students, and families had to overcome common misconceptions about online learning, even briefly. First, everyone needs the technological capacity to be in an online learning environment (Trust & Whalen, 2021, p.17). Second, adequate internet access was an issue for some students and families (Francom, Lee, & Pinkney, 2021, p. 598). Third, keeping students engaged with synchronous or asynchronous classes sometimes proved challenging (Trust & Whalen, 2021, p.18). The many explanations for why it did not go well for most schools showed how difficult online learning is for students, teachers,

and families. However, some students and teachers were successful in the online learning environment (Black, Ferdig, & Thompson, 2020, p. 119).

The pandemic had many negative and positive effects, but one stands out more. Some students were much more successful learning online than others. Black et al. (2021) argue that students were more successful because they were more organized, supported, and motivated. Others note that emotional intelligence and student personality are primary predictors of student success in online courses, where the combination of resilience and self-efficacy can play a prominent role in online learning (Berenson, Boyles, & Weaver, 2008). Gering et al. (2018) found that previous student GPA and age were significant indicators of student success in online courses (p. 73). However, knowing that this study was completed for higher education students is critical. Throughout the pandemic, student motivation played a role in student success (Hira & Anderson, 2021, p. 104). This study also noted that to help in this area, online learning must include student ownership and enable connections between students (p. 105). Above all, this literature review analyzes the students, families, and teachers' responsibility to have a successful online experience since the research needs to include students transitioning from in-person to online learning.

Role of Students

While the ages of students are different in online learning, the role of the student remains mostly the same. In a study by Gerring et al. (2018), multiple statements from students using the term “teach yourself” were used in interviews (p. 76). Even with the assistance of teachers, the students had to teach themselves various things while learning online. First, this referred to students having to teach themselves time-management skills to complete their work and put forth the effort (Henrickson, Degreenia, & Bruce, 2021, p. 16). In a brick-and-mortar school, the bell

schedule dictates where students are supposed to go, and the teacher in each classroom helps students complete assignments. Secondly, students had to teach themselves if a teacher used a presentation or some form of written notes instead of a lecture video (Gering et al., 2018, p. 76). Students thought they had to do all the learning for themselves even though the material was in front of them. Lastly, students meant they had to teach themselves because they had to do more independent research than in in-person classes (Henrickson, Degreenia, & Bruce, 2021, p. 16). More than anything, all of these were new to the student. If students were not accustomed to learning online, they thought it would be very similar to what they had to do in person.

Communication between the student and teacher is essential for online learning. The primary method of contact is email or using the LMS. However, as Borup et al. (2019) discovered, some students refrain from emailing or contacting their teachers. They said they feel like they are “bugging them,” especially if the teachers do not respond immediately (p. 264). On the other hand, if the teacher responds within 24 hours, the students are more apt to continue to contact them. It is important to note that the teacher is responsible for getting back with the students in a reasonable amount of time. Still, if the student does not understand an assignment or has a question about the content, the student must initiate a conversation with the teacher. As Keaton & Gilbert (2020) points out, when a student engages the teacher in an online class, it “could have a positive effect on their overall success with the course” (p. 142). Some students prefer to talk with their teacher instead of email, which is challenging in an asynchronous learning environment. Nevertheless, most teachers will try to make time if students need this support.

Wong et al. (2019) point out that students are more responsible for self-regulated learning. Self-regulated learning (SRL) can impact student success in online education using

nine strategies: metacognition, time management, effort regulation, critical thinking, elaboration, rehearsal, organization, help-seeking, and peer learning. These are necessary for all types of education, but “metacognition, time management, effort regulation, and critical thinking were related to online academic success” (p. 357). The issue lies with the teachers supporting these or other learning strategies if the student needs help. However, as Stark (2019) points out, most SRL strategies are more common in face-to-face than in online classrooms. In addition, this study mentions that students with higher self-efficacy were more likely to succeed in an online class. This intrinsic motivation to do well and complete online courses are imperative for student academic success. Believing they can succeed in online learning showed a stronger incentive to learn, improving student performance.

Students can also be intentional about increasing their interactions with other students. Keaton & Gilbert (2020) examine the various interactions for successful online learning. Synchronous classes involve more student-to-student interactions during the live meetings, but students must make more effort to socialize with other students in asynchronous courses. In addition, there are discussion board prompts where students must interact with each other. Apart from these discussions, there are a few more opportunities to socialize with other students within this online learning format. Some teachers encourage group projects or peer reviews, but discussions are the standard tool for conversation. Because of this, students must be enabled to get involved with clubs or teams in the school, the local library, religious organizations, the YMCA, or other different public settings. It would be more beneficial for students to socialize with their classmates because it allows them to get “help with coursework and social connectedness” (p. 147). Even though social interaction may not help a student score higher on an assessment, developing relationships with other online students can provide additional

benefits such as belonging and connections. Students may interact on social media, or they may meet in person. Some online schools have in-person events throughout the year, but according to Keaton & Gilbert (2020), many students do not go due to a lack of time for social interaction. Many students choose online classes because they need more flexibility due to extra-curricular activities, but some do not have time to spare for anything else.

Role of Parents

To some, online school is a “glorified homeschool” program (Keaton & Gilbert, p. 151, 2020). If this is the case, the parents and families of the students need to be directly involved for the students to be successful. The difference between today’s online learning and the early days of online learning is that technology makes it easier for the teacher to be directly involved in the learning process. However, the parent must still play a crucial role for a student to succeed. Therefore, one of the first things that must be considered is for the parent to determine if the online school suits their children. As Black et al. (2020) point out, specific questions must be answered to determine if a family is ready for an online learner. These questions include:

1. Can their child maintain a study schedule and complete assignments with limited supervision?
2. Can their child ask for help and effectively communicate with a teacher via telephone, text, email, or video?
3. Does their child have an innate drive to learn skills, acquire knowledge, and complete assignments?
4. Does their child possess foundational reading, writing, math, and computer literacy skills (paras. 7-8)?

The family must be ready to provide support and help for the student. Keaton & Gilbert (2020) offer a few ways for parents and families to set up their students for success. The first step is organizing their schedule of assignments for the week. Sadly, “organization was the area that parents seem to help the least according to students” (p. 144). Conversely, the highest parent participation area is when the parents monitor their child’s work. Monitoring student work is typical for families to help with students when students are in person. Encouraging students to complete their work and instructing students on how to answer the content are also ways parents can help their students with online learning. If parents can help with these skills, students will have a better opportunity to do better. It is essential to understand that it takes more time and effort for parents in online education.

Parental involvement is critical, no matter the age of the students. For example, Ricker et al. (2021) acknowledge that there is a “significant relationship in student performance across the elementary, middle, and high school band” with parent involvement (p. 197). However, many parents do not think it is necessary or appropriate to help students with their work with online learning. Families sometimes do not know where to begin because they have never seen students learning in an online environment. As Keaton & Gilbert (2020) mention, schools must be able to train parents on how to help their students. One of the ways to do this is with a series of professional development opportunities or meetings to teach families about the various aspects of online learning. This includes the LMS, email, checking student grades/progress, and more. As Ricker et al. (2021) generate in their parental involvement framework, the more parents logged in and monitored their student’s work on the LMS, the more successful the students were in class. Parents must prioritize checking on their students to see if they are doing what they need in class. They must also be prepared to offer specific help to their struggling students. This

could be as simple as encouraging students to email or communicate with the teacher when they are stuck on a problem. The teachers and the school will do what they can, but parents play an integral role in helping the students be successful in online classes.

Role of Teachers

Teachers of online learning have many responsibilities. The most important is to ensure that they cover the standards and content they are supposed to set forth by the local and state school boards or departments. Barcelona (2009) notes that effective online teachers “represent one of three legs that help to support online learning, standing alongside a committed community of learners and the technology that supports knowledge distribution and collaboration” (p. 196). In an online world, this can be challenging because the pace and modalities are different. Still, it is also because teachers need help incorporating the rigor that needs to come with the content. As Joosten & Cusatic (2019) point out, the design of the lesson or unit must match the online format. There must be sound online pedagogy so the teachers set the students up for success. The content delivery can be different from an in-person school, but it needs to be as or more effective.

Students must be engaged and immersed in the content. The online class must also be user-friendly and allow all students to easily access the LMS (Kelly & Lock, 2021). In an asynchronous classroom, everything must be clear, concise, and organized so students and parents can understand what is expected of them. They will know what to do if there are clear expectations that will improve their online learning experience. This is especially true for students with disabilities. It would benefit the teacher to include either more instructions or break them into smaller pieces to have confidence in their work. Regardless, if “the content and

teacher are readily accessible in various formats and teachers are mindful of the complexities of students' lives outside of an academic setting," all students can value online learning (p. 56).

Multiple studies mention that online teachers must be "present" (Gering et al., 2018; Kelly & Lock, 2021). Students describe this as "responding promptly to emails, providing personal feedback on assignments, providing reminders, and recording lectures as audio or screencasts" (Gering et al., p. 75, 2018). Teachers must treat the online classroom like they would in an in-person classroom. There needs to be communication, timely and efficient feedback, and personalization of the content. Without these, students will feel that the teacher does not care or want to put the time and effort into learning. Kelly & Lock (2021) notes that "a strong teacher presence that fosters a supportive environment is fundamental to student engagement and success" (p. 56). It is a challenge for teachers to design compelling content and be present to support students. However, it is more beneficial for teachers to connect with students through their interactions and support them when they need help (Joosten & Cusatis, 2019). In addition, teachers must be able to help develop students' online learning abilities. As Zhu & Bonk (2019) note, "strategies such as quizzes for self-assessment, progress indicators, tutorials on technology use, learning tips, navigational aids for the course, instructional modeling and various other resources were used" to help students learn in an online environment (p. 125).

An area that all students and families need help with for online learning is providing support for struggling students or needing encouragement. Any online learning format encourages students if their teacher is an actual person, not an automated system or program. Borup et al. (2019) offer that online teachers must be able to provide support and be as available as possible. Even though this is difficult to do in an online classroom, the more a teacher is available, the more likely students can succeed. Weems-Landingham & Paternite (2021)

encourage teachers to check in with their students for asynchronous online discussions at the beginning, middle, and end times. This will get students on the right track for their conversation in the front. It is imperative to be clear and concise with any questions and directions. In the middle, it is an opportunity to rephrase the question or give feedback to students that have already participated. The end of the online discussion is an excellent opportunity to close the conversation and reflect on what everyone said. Stopping and acknowledging these conversations shows the students that the teacher cares about them and their thoughts or opinions. Even though it is always challenging to find time to engage students in their discussions, teachers must put forth their best so students can put forth theirs.

Challenges to Online Learning

As with any learning, many barriers exist with online learning. However, because teachers and schools do not see students in person and may be separated by geographical distance, more challenges appear than in brick-and-mortar schools. These same difficulties were encountered during the COVID-19 pandemic, such as student engagement, technology competency, and a lack of communication between students and families (Trust & Whalen, 2021, p. 19; Francom, Lee, & Pinkney, 2021, p. 598). For example, getting the students to log in, meet with staff members, or answer an email can take time and effort. In addition, if a student or family lives in a different area than the virtual school, it can be challenging to connect with them if they have yet to participate or log in to class. Deng & Sun (2022) offer six categories of barriers to online learning:

1. Technical - the student does not have access to technical equipment or the digital skills to complete online learning.
2. Cultural - the student lacks focus and cannot focus on online instruction.

3. Environmental - the student needs a quiet work environment.
4. Balance - the student cannot balance schoolwork, work, activities, etc.
5. Social - the student cannot connect or interact with other students, teachers, or classmates.
6. Financial - the student cannot purchase the proper equipment or tools for online learning (p. 80).

Stark (2019) found that students in online courses had the lower extrinsic and intrinsic motivation (p. 243). Increasing inspiration and breaking barriers can be difficult for students. Mostly, teachers and schools can only control the student experience a little since the learning occurs online rather than face-to-face. Getting the students to log in and meet with teachers can take time and effort.

As a result, online learning has higher attrition rates (Perry & Pilati, 2011, p. 100). Because of the flexibility and the lack of physical interaction with students and teachers, students are typically required to learn independently. This self-directed learning or student ownership in online learning can take time. As Sansone et al. (2011) note, if there are defined goals for students, they are more likely to work towards them and be more self-directed in their learning (p. 208). In addition, the curriculum must connect to students' real life but also have relevance for them (p. 209). Overall, the percentage of students with a high ability to be self-regulated learners are only about 39-41% (Lan & Paton, 2011, p. 72). This again relates to the understanding that online schooling is not for everyone. Students must be able to have some competency in self-regulating their learning to be able to survive in an online environment.

One of the biggest challenges is designing content and ensuring that teachers are willing to learn how to teach online (Perry & Pilati, 2011, p. 100). Online courses are designed in such a

way as to help the student learn best in the environment. For example, instruction is not posting a slideshow or the same strategies as an in-person classroom. Also, as Hendrickson, Degreenia, & Bruce (2021) examines students' thoughts concerning online learning during the pandemic, teachers need to have a positive attitude, begin the school year with synchronous learning to get them started in the right direction and listen to students' feedback about their courses (p. 15). Teachers play a critical role in student learning in an online environment, and if there is no desire to do what is best for the student, teachers will not be successful in helping students.

Conclusion

Online learning is not for all students, teachers, and families. Everyone must assist students with their learning experience in being successful. Growth, achievement, flexibility, social-emotional learning, the balance of extracurricular activities, safety, and many more can be reasons students choose an online environment. However, virtual school success consists of completing and understanding the content while growing as a student. Only some students can perform with high scores in all classes, but if the student makes satisfactory grades, or even better than in-person, this would be a success. This literature review is concerned with gathering previous research on successful online learning. Only a few studies examined the transition from in-person to online instruction, and most of these focused on the emergency COVID-19 shutdowns in the Spring 2020 semester. However, skills and behaviors that help students become successful online learners require the student, family, and school to be as involved as possible.

Students would choose to be online rather than in-person learners for many reasons. Some students dislike socialization, while others cherish it. Some parents do not like being involved in their student's education, while others will do whatever it takes to help. Some teachers dislike online instructional strategies, while others relish creating and designing

different lessons. Even though online learning has been around for a few decades, it is still relatively new in the eyes of many students and families. However, just because something is new and unfamiliar does not mean it is not practical for some students and families. The COVID-19 pandemic brought about a lot of negative aspects to education, but hopefully, it has also brought a new perspective to online learning. Barriers and challenges exist for all virtual schools, students, families, and staff members, but there can be ways to overcome them if there is a shared willingness for everyone to be successful.

Chapter 3

Research Methodology

There is limited research on the common traits of students who successfully transition from in-person to online learning. Recent research has focused on the role students, families, and schools must take for students to succeed online (Joosten & Cusatic, 2019; Black et al., 2020; Keaton & Gilbert, 2020; Wong et al., 2019). Students and families continuously transition from traditional brick-and-mortar schools to online schools, but research needs to be done on why some students are more successful. As online schools increase in popularity, this study aimed to help ease the change in learning environments while identifying the skills and traits of thriving online students. Colleges and universities will also find interest in this study since students are much more likely to take online courses in higher education. Qualitative research is necessary for students to give their perspectives on how student behaviors change from in-person to online. Students participating in this study live in Tennessee and will have attended an in-person school before shifting to online.

Research Questions

What behaviors do students need to transition from in-person to online learning successfully?

What supports can help increase students' likelihood of success in an online environment?

Research Design

A qualitative research method is selected for this research project. Through this approach, there were direct and descriptive narratives from students concerning their successful or unsuccessful experiences in online learning. There were four focus groups divided into the following: (1) successful in-person and successful online, (2) successful in-person and not successful online, (3) not successful in-person and successful online, and (4) not successful in-person and not successful online. In addition, students shared their viewpoints on the different learning modalities and specifics of their behaviors in both learning environments. This approach will allow current online schools to develop and coach students transitioning from in-person to online learning. It will also enable in-person schools to identify students who would benefit from learning in a virtual environment. In addition, higher education institutions can use the data to help incoming students prepare for online courses.

Site Selection

One school was selected for this study. The school is in Tennessee and is an online public school that has existed for twelve years since 2010. It is accredited by Cognia, approved by NCAA, and awarded the Tennessee Reward School status for five consecutive years. This reward recognizes academic achievement and growth by the Tennessee Department of Education. The school is in Northeast Tennessee and, until 2021, was a 9 - 12 virtual school. It is a 6 - 12 school after expanding to include grades 6 - 8 for the 2021-2022 school year. At present, there are 250 students enrolled in the entire school. Even though this school is in Northeast Tennessee, the school serves students across the state of Tennessee.

The school is part of a local public school system and consistently uses the high-quality curriculum purchased for the school system. However, the instruction and teaching methods are different because the instruction is entirely online. The school is asynchronous, where students

have weekly due dates but are not required to log in at any specific time. It is designed for students and families to have flexibility and freedom in completing assignments on their own time but within the constraints of weekly due dates. With asynchronous work, the lessons are placed into weekly modules where the instruction and assignments are located. The school calendar is like a brick-and-mortar school with various days off due to teacher professional development, holidays, and planned breaks throughout the year. Because the school is a public school, it must follow the exact expectations and local/state school board policies as in-person schools concerning state accountability, measurable objectives, and submitting a yearly school improvement plan.

Participants in the Study

The study participants represented current students in grades nine through twelve and recent graduates. The focus groups were divided based on their previous in-person and current online learning experiences. The four groups consisted of the following: (1) successful in-person and online, (2) successful in-person and unsuccessful online, (3) unsuccessful in-person and successful online, and (4) unsuccessful in-person and online.

Role of the Researcher

The researcher is the current administrator of the school and served as a partially active participant in the study. The researcher interviewed current and former students, perhaps leading to bias in the questions and focus group discussions. However, the interview questions were organized so as not to force favorable responses.

Before the Study

Multiple establishments approved the research. Milligan University's Institutional Review Board (IRB) process was conducted before the study began. Also, permission was obtained from the local school board for the online school.

Participating School

The participating public school has a local education agency in Northeast Tennessee. The school serves students from grades six through twelve, but the middle school grades were recently added two years ago. Due to this, information from the school was only asked of students in grades nine through twelve.

Selection of Participants

The focus group participants were organized and selected by looking at their TNReady/EOC records on the TVAAS site (2022). TNReady and EOC assessments are Tennessee standardized tests that all students in grades three through eight and specific courses in grades nine through twelve must take. These courses include Algebra 1, Geometry, Algebra 2, US History, Biology, English 1, and English 2. TVAAS is the Tennessee Value-Added Assessment System which “measures student growth year over year, regardless of whether the student is proficient on the state assessment. In calculating a TVAAS score, a student's performance is compared to the performance of their peers” (TDOE, 2022).

For participants to be considered, students must first have transferred from a brick-and-mortar public school. This search narrowed the sampling due to the transient nature of students who move back and forth between schools. It also limited the number of students because some come from homeschool umbrella programs or private schools that do not take TNReady or EOC assessments.

If students showed growth in all assessed areas from their time at an in-person to online school, they were examined further by looking at their scores from their time at the in-person school. If students were above the average school percentile, the students were placed in successful online and successful in-person focus groups. Conversely, if the students were below the average school percentile but still grew in transitioning from in-person to online, in this case, the students were placed in the successful online and unsuccessful in-person focus groups. If students declined in their percentiles when transitioning to the online school, they were examined further by looking at their TNReady percentiles during their last in-person year. If the student declined from in-person to online but was above the in-person school percentile, the student was placed in the successful in-person and unsuccessful online focus group. On the other hand, suppose the student declined from in-person to online and was below the in-person school percentile. In that case, the student was placed in the unsuccessful in-person and unsuccessful online focus group. There were two to three students in each focus group.

Implementation of the Study

After the participants were selected and informed consent was obtained, the focus groups met on Zoom. This digital software aided in the accessibility of students since they do not live in the same area and are located across Tennessee. The recordings were saved on the researcher's computer. Zoom allowed closed captioning and assisted in the transcription process. Additionally, the digital software Sonix was utilized for the transcription process. Once the sessions were transcribed, the coding of common themes throughout the sessions was conducted and analyzed. The researcher used the digital software Atlas to help with the coding process. Finally, a second coder was used to ensure the reliability of the coding process.

The questions in the focus group discussions were open-ended but structured to allow students to share their experiences and perceptions of their transition from in-person to online learning. Ideally, allowing students to express their thoughts on what helped or inhibited their transition to an online learning environment enabled the researcher to see common themes and differences throughout the focus groups. In addition, once the interviews were transcribed, member checking was completed by sending the comments and insights through email to ensure the words represented were accurate to the participant. This process confirmed the study's reliability and validity.

Data Management

Data was collected through Zoom focus group sessions, and each session was saved to the researcher's local computer. Once the research project was completed, all recordings were deleted. In addition, all printed materials and transcriptions remained secured in a locked cabinet and secure cloud storage for five years. Only the researcher can access the cabinet and computer with all the digital data. After five years, the researcher will delete and shred all printed materials used in the research.

Data Analysis

Focus group transcriptions were analyzed and categorized based on any themes appearing in the coding process with the help of the digital program Atlas. This process was repeated to identify sub-themes and investigate the data descriptively. In addition, there was a second coder to increase the reliability of the coding process. Once themes or sub-themes were identified, the researcher placed them in various categories to help develop common findings.

Trustworthiness

The study used focus group interviews to allow students to give their thoughts and perceptions on the traits necessary to transition from an in-person to an online school. Member checking ensured that the themes found in the data matched what students were trying to portray. In addition, it allowed the students to know that their statements were accurate. Also, there was a second coder that increased the reliability of the coding process. The researcher chose this person and coded the same transcribed interviews. Finally, the researcher and the additional coder analyzed their findings together to ensure the reliability of the results. Ideally, the study was valid and reliable.

It is crucial to note the Covid issues and state reporting of assessments. No assessments were given during the 2020 spring testing cycle, and learning loss occurred for students enrolled in public schools. The growth or decline from in-person to online learning could be due to the closures or the amount of instructional time missed in the last two years. School closures and schools needing more time to be ready for students to learn online are possible reasons for the decline.

Ethical Considerations

The researcher took specific steps when completing educational research since students are involved. Tuckman & Harper (2012) argue that research must help people improve their lives and, therefore, must consider ethical considerations (p. 12). The following steps were followed when conducting research with human subjects:

1. Informed consent will be given by the student, parent/guardian, and local school district.
2. All participant information and data will be kept private.
3. All participants will not be identified at any point in the study.

4. All information and data will be kept confidential.
5. The researcher will check with participants about correctly representing their comments before publishing the study.

Potential Contributions of the Research

There needs to be more research on students transitioning from an in-person to an online learning environment. Students and families sometimes look to online learning to avoid social situations at schools, give more flexibility to pursue a sport or hobby, or various other reasons. Once students switch to this setting, there is typically an adjustment or transition period. Even though online learning continues to adapt and change as technology changes, students consistently move from one environment to another. This study could help current online schools, higher education institutions, and current families when new students have yet to gain experience in online learning.

Chapter 4

Data Analysis and Findings

This study investigated the student behaviors linked to successful transitioning from an in-person to an online school. Many factors determine whether students and families can thrive in an online learning environment. Discovering common themes and traits among various groups of students can help pinpoint characteristics that help students transition schools. The participants in the study included sophomores, juniors, seniors, and recent early graduates. As discussed in Chapter 3, a qualitative approach was utilized to gather data from students sharing their experiences of coming to an online learning environment.

The qualitative research relied on focus group interviews. As Merriam & Tisdell (2016) point out, “focus groups are appropriate to be used when this is the best way to get the best data that addresses your research question” (p. 115). These interviews were divided based on student success in online and in-person learning environments. The students were grouped according to previous TNReady/EOC assessment results. The four focus groups were (1) SOSI - Successful Online and Successful In-person, (2) UOSI - Unsuccessful Online and Successful In-person, (3) SOUI - Successful Online and Unsuccessful In-person, and (4) UOUI - Unsuccessful Online and Unsuccessful In-person. These focus groups had conversations and shared ideas throughout the online meetings. A total of nine participants were involved in the conversations, and all were from the same online school. This school is in Tennessee and serves 300 students in grades six through twelve across the state. The four focus group meetings were on Zoom and lasted 30-45 minutes. There was a total of two to three students in each focus group. The data included four females and five males, with the participants being current or recently graduated students.

Analysis of Data

Data were analyzed using Merriam & Tisdell's (2016) step-by-step process: "naming the categories, determining the number of categories, and figuring out systems for placing data into categories" (p. 236). After each focus group session on Zoom, the recording was transcribed with the help of the digital software Sonix. The recordings were transcribed multiple times to ensure accuracy. In addition, member checking occurred with the participants after the focus group sessions were transcribed. The transcriptions were then coded and analyzed using the digital software Atlas. Once all groups were finished, the transcriptions were again analyzed as an entire group. The themes or categories were gathered from student responses to the interview questions. Several were repeated throughout all four groups, but others were specific to each of the four groups. A second coder separately coded the transcriptions to increase the reliability of the study.

Research Questions

What behaviors do students need to transition from in-person to online learning successfully?

What supports can help increase students' likelihood of success in an online environment?

Focus Group Interview Questions (Appendix B)

1. Why did you choose to move to online learning?
2. How did you prepare for your transition to online learning, if at all?
3. Describe any difficulties when you transitioned from in-person to online learning.
4. Describe your daily routine when you first became an online student.

5. How involved are/were your parents/family in your online learning?
6. What are the similarities and differences between online learning and learning in a brick-and-mortar school?
7. What did you learn about yourself as a student when transitioning to online learning?
8. What advice would you give others when coming from a brick-and-mortar school?
9. Give an example of something you did when learning in a brick-and-mortar school that you do not do in online learning.
10. How did the online teachers help or hinder your transition to online learning?
11. What could online schools do to support better students coming from in-person schools?
12. What is challenging about online learning? Why?

Each focus group session on Zoom was recorded and transcribed with Sonix, a digital software. However, after the software completed the transcription, the transcripts were reviewed again to ensure accuracy by listening to the recording and comparing it to the product the software produced. Once each focus group was transcribed correctly, the coding process began. First, the data was organized and then placed into multiple categories or themes. In addition, the focus group questions provided specific themes based on previous research on this topic, as outlined in Chapter 2. After the transcription was coded and sorted, a second coder was used to increase reliability. Through both processes, the coding of focus group sessions and the questions, multiple materializing themes came from the data. These common themes included the following: (1) External student behaviors, (2) Internal student behaviors, (3) Family qualities, and (4) School qualities. In the proceeding analyses, students are identified as “Student” and a number (Student 1, Student 2, etc.). All the proceeding student words are from the transcriptions.

External Student Behaviors

One of the highly discussed topics when students shared their ideas on transitioning to an online school dealt with the external behaviors of students. This encompasses items that students can control to help or hinder their online learning experience. The sub-themes include (1) environment, (2) making a schedule, and (3) social interactions. All nine students mentioned at least one of these sub-themes in their responses. Table 1 provides a visual breakdown of the entire external behaviors category.

Table 1

External student behaviors as a common theme

	Environment	Making a Schedule	Social Interactions
#1 (SOSI)	3/3	1/3	0/3
#2 (UOSI)	1/2	0/2	2/2
#3 (SOUI)	0/2	2/2	2/2
#4 (UOUI)	1/2	0/2	2/2

As seen in Table 1, not all external qualities were present in the focus groups. All three subthemes were mentioned in each focus group, but not all students found them essential in an online learning environment. While the environment was crucial in Focus Group 1, setting up a consistent schedule during the day and social interaction with peers were not considered essential. However, the other focus groups felt that social interactions with peers were imperative. It was a concern to ensure high school students continued to have physical interactions with others and not become isolated or disassociated with society. In addition, maintaining a consistent daily schedule was the least popular quality for students, but the

students who utilized this were all successful online students. In addition, the two focus groups that did not use a daily schedule were the unsuccessful online learners (2 and 4) who only partially had an efficient work location or environment. While Focus Groups 1 and 3 had differing responses concerning the learning environment and scheduling, Group 1 focused on the environment while Group 3 focused on the schedule. Either way, consistency with a daily routine or workplace is critical when learning online. Students discovered how to make it work for them, but it took time and effort to figure it out for themselves.

Environment

There were multiple connotations for a proper work environment in an online setting. The following quotes are directly from students in the different focus groups, where they try to explain how they set up their working environment when coming to an online school.

A critical question of each focus group was to describe their daily routine when they first became an online student. Some of the students chose to answer this question by discussing their work environment or setting. Student 8 answered this question: “I pretty much just made sure at home I had an area separate from my grandmother and my dad, just where I could have my own private learning area.” Student 3 offered a different idea. “I go to her (mother) office a lot to do my work, and it helps to have a dedicated school space that's not right beside the game console.” Enjoying a space that is set aside for learning can prove to be beneficial. Student 3 continued to elaborate on this statement, “For me to have a space that was different from my home to, like, once I'm here, I'm supposed to be working and not chilling at home. It's kind of like the mindset, and it feels different.” Student 5 added that students must ensure “they have at least somewhere to be, or just somewhere they can get the stuff done.” Student 2 admitted, “Yeah, I probably would work better in a different environment as a student who attended an online school for a

flexible learning environment to accommodate their travels. Maybe, but I like doing it better just where I am.” The importance of a specific space set aside and quiet for students, even if students are not in the same place each day, helps students focus on their schooling and education. The strong sentiment with focus group one was finding a location that worked for them. Like Student 2’s explanation, Student 1 also enjoyed finding various quiet places to work.

My favorite place of all would probably be like in a hammock, like in our woods or something. Like somewhere quiet. There's always a safe space. Everybody has one, and I guess quiet trees is mine.

However, a specific place is one of many essential pieces for a proper work environment. Student 1 continued the conversation, “I would wear my headphones or something...or listen to something. I don't know, just something to help distract the distractions.” There are also opportunities for distractions and negative influences in these quiet places. Student 4 explained that if a student works in a common place where other items are located, it could negatively affect the intended learning.

But, you know, this room was also the same room that everything else I did happened in. So that ended up not being a very good idea because, you know, it was my bedroom, but my bedroom was like where every, you know, TV console, you know, everything, everything, all the other entertainment options I had in an immediate reach.

Amid distractions or things that could interrupt student progress, some students need help to relieve the pressure of getting off task. In a comfortable and common work environment, the student must be intentional about working efficiently. Student 1 elaborated:

I literally did my school on my gaming computer, and I didn't have any troubles with that. But I would have trouble if somebody was watching the TV or playing video games in the same room because you kind of get distracted.

The work environment is an external quality that students can control. Focus group one spoke continuously on the idea that although the setting may change where the learning occurs, students must find a location that allows them to work consistently and efficiently. Minor disruptions and easy distractions can add up quickly in an online learning environment. Successful online students pay attention to these details and set up a space conducive to learning.

Making a Schedule

Making a schedule was also a consistent theme throughout the focus group conversations. Even though only a few students made a schedule to complete their assignments for the week, there were discussions from the open-ended questions that thought making a schedule would benefit them as online students. The only two groups where students made a schedule were Focus Groups 1 and 3, the students who have been successful in an online setting.

Transitioning to an online school from an in-person school can take time and effort. One significant reason is the amount of flexibility or freedom for students, especially in an asynchronous setting. Student 6 explained that the schedule is set for all students in an in-person school, but online learning offers a schedule that fits the student's needs:

Online learning kind of allows for you to set up your own schedule throughout the day while the brick-and-mortar kind of makes it. Or it is like this time period you can work on this, and then this time period you can work on that.

There are times when the typical school day with the required amount of time in a class does not meet the diverse needs of the students. Most asynchronous online schools allow students to work on their schedule within reason. Student 6 continued to discuss the reasoning for choosing an online school by saying, “the less rigorous schedule of getting up at 7:00 in the morning and things like that, I kind of thought it would be a little bit easier for me.” Sometimes, the students can set a schedule that works and helps them learn in a way that makes sense. Student 1 offered the reason for this, “Why would I have five days of school when I could finish in three? I guess is my idea.” Students in an online school choose this learning environment because it allows them to pursue other things outside of school, such as a hobby, sport, musical instrument, or even a job. It removes the rigid structure of a physical school building and puts the schedule in the students’ hands.

The online school’s flexibility and freedom can also hinder students. They are used to the day being planned for them without thinking about how or when to work on specific classes. There is a struggle when students first transition to a different learning environment. Student 3 explained, “Honestly, I didn't really have a routine for a long time. I just kind of struggled around and didn't really plan anything.” Learning how to make a schedule and set up routines is a quality that successful online students exhibit. Student 2 discussed what it was like when first transitioning to online learning:

I think when I first started, I didn't spend a whole lot of time planning out, I don't think.

Definitely not as much as I should. I kind of just, from what I can remember, I would just go into each class and do what it looked like I needed to do that day.

The inability to make a schedule and have a learning plan can be detrimental. Student 5 repeated Student 2’s sentiment, “Everything I did was kind of unstructured time.” However, developing

structure is a trait that students can develop and build with more time spent in this environment.

Student 2 continued:

Even if I would make a calendar, I'd end up falling behind. And by the end of the week, I end up doing a lot more than I should be. But then some other weeks, the calendar works out perfect and maybe get done a little early.

Making a schedule consistently takes time and effort, but students can make it work each week.

Student 6 tried to make a schedule and stick to it. "I did my best to set up a schedule so I didn't get too loose with it."

Once a student can make a schedule, they can adjust their daily work routines. This enables students to include their needs throughout the day. For some students, this includes working a job; for others, it includes learning the concepts in a specific way or at different times of the day that benefit them. Student 5 liked to work at specific points during the day. "Not in the morning, but more so in the afternoon." In addition, Student 3 did something similar.

I know a lot of people work the normal work hours, you know, like 8 to 5 or whatever, like, do their school during that time. But I found that I don't really work like that. And I do a lot of work at night, which for some reason I work better at night. And I think it's good to figure out when you work good and not just go with what other people say. It's like what they do, and it works for them.

Student 1 employed a different strategy: "Doing one class and focusing solely on that one class the entire day." Student 7 had this to say about the schedule utilized for the week.

The best thing I thought for me to make sure I got my work done on time was to do the hardest first. So, I would start at the top of the week with my subjects that I struggled most with.

Each method could benefit new online students, but it takes time to determine what works for each specific student. In multiple cases, other students had a job and were in high school, which meant they had to work around multiple schedules. Student 6 explained:

For me, I did have a job, so I did my best to try to pack my Mondays and Tuesdays and a little bit of Wednesdays as much as I could so that I can have Wednesday afternoon, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, Sunday to work.

Throughout each situation or circumstance, students who made a schedule for the week could enjoy the freedom and flexibility an online school provides in addition to being successful online students. It takes time and practice, but it is critical to have a plan for the week.

Social Interactions

Ensuring students still participate in social activities while attending an online school is an additional subtheme throughout the focus group conversations. Every focus group, except for the first focus group, highlighted the importance of doing something with other students outside of school. Student 5 offered this challenge when first coming to an online school:

I feel like a challenge of online learning is that you might lose, like, I don't know what word to use. You might lose just doing daily human things, getting up, getting dressed, and kind of making yourself still feel good. Like, Yeah, I'm ready for the day.

Some students enjoy and look forward to sleeping in and not having to wake up as early to go to school. Still, as most of these students noted, the COVID-19 pandemic negatively impacted many adolescents because of the lack of socialization and peer interactions. Student 6 offered this insight:

I never realized me being an extroverted type of person, how important a social environment was to me. It impacted my mood, my want to learn, my ability to learn and things like that. I'm just more of a social person.

The lack of social interaction can negatively impact student learning for some students. Student personality plays a role in this, but also it is an adjustment not seeing their peers consistently. Students must set up time as often as possible to connect with others so that they are getting social interaction.

Social anxiety and getting away from the drama associated with in-person school are complicated. These students want to avoid others, or at least their current peers. Student 8 explained, "Really, I just wasn't enjoying class as much and being around people." However, there is danger in totally avoiding others as Student 5 explained, "I feel like, I don't know, if you do online school, especially in an environment like high school, I feel like it can create socially inept people, at least because you're not really talking to anybody." Continuously avoiding others and not being purposeful in trying to interact with others can negatively affect students later. Student 5 continued, "I've noticed that like people that have done online school or have been homeschooled their whole lives, they lack the ability to be social and good with people, and that's not their fault." Part of this falls on the student and family to be intentional when students are online. Student 4 explained how to continue to interact with others:

I also continue to do things outside of school that keep me social, keep me moving, keep me being around other people. And I think that's what a lot of people miss, and they don't do when they move to online learning.

The school also plays a role in attempting to incorporate as much social interaction between students as possible. This can be challenging in an asynchronous setting where students do not attend live classes and are all on different schedules. However, as Student 7 elaborated, setting up places or spaces for students to connect could help alleviate some of the social needs of students:

My thing would be incorporate as much group or social ability that you can. I mean, learning and work is a solo thing. You have to prove what you know, more so than what a group knows. But still having interactions where you talk to each other, it really helps more than many may realize.

Through various avenues, most students need social interaction when in an online setting. Students and families are mainly responsible for ensuring these needs are met weekly in an online setting, but online schools could also positively impact them. In some cases, students desire to not be in any social context. As seen with all subthemes with External Student Qualities, there must be a balance and structure for students to be successful online learners.

Internal Student Behaviors

Another highly discussed topic when students shared their ideas on transitioning to an online school dealt with the internal behaviors of students. Two repeatedly mentioned qualities come from the student's ability to deal with their mindset, determination, and mental attitude.

The sub-themes include (1) self-discipline and (2) time management. All nine students

mentioned at least one of these sub-themes in their responses. Focus Groups 1 and 3 had all participants explain the importance of self-discipline and time management in an online setting. In comparison, Focus Groups 2 and 4 only had one student discuss them. Table 2 provides a visual breakdown of the entire internal behaviors category.

Table 2

Internal student behaviors as a common theme

	Self-discipline	Time Management
#1 (SOSI)	3/3	3/3
#2 (UOSI)	1/2	1/2
#3 (SOUI)	2/2	2/2
#4 (UOUI)	0/2	1/2

Self-discipline

Participants discussed the self-discipline and determination it takes to be an online student at length. This subtheme covers various aspects of learning in this environment but focuses on consistently working and completing the assignments on time. Once students have a quiet environment and make a schedule, they must have the motivation to complete their assignments. Student 1 acknowledged that it is sometimes difficult to get back on track after taking a break by saying, “It’s just knowing when to go back and finish your work. It’s a big deal.” Sticking to a schedule and understanding when you are about to get complacent or procrastinate is challenging. Student 6 explained that self-discipline requires students to stick to their schedule as critical to learning online, “It’s easy to get lazy when you’re at home all day, so especially when you know you got your parents at work, it’s just you. It’s easy to get lazy, so

sticking to that schedule for me.” Student 4 acknowledged that being consistent with a schedule can help improve positive outcomes for online students, “You have to have the self-discipline...and really try to stay consistent.” Getting started and working is sometimes the difficult part, as Student 8 explained:

I pretty much had difficulties having to discipline myself to actually get up at a reasonable time and get my stuff done rather than just doing whatever I wanted throughout the day and then worrying about it last minute. I really struggled with that.

Student 4 continued to explain and emphasize the determination and mindset of having to finish assignments in an online setting: “I don't want to do it, but like, I force myself, I sit down, I'm like, all right, we're going to get this done now.” Even though the work is not easy or desired, students must be disciplined enough to want to complete what is necessary by the due date.

Every learner is unique and deals with these qualities differently. Self-discipline only comes naturally for some students, and many acknowledged how difficult it could be to focus on their work. Student 5 commented on the self-discipline challenges:

My ADHD brain is all over the place as well. So, you know, I think I sit down and do something. And even if I do sit down and start on it, which is helpful if I start on it. But even if I do, you know, in 10 minutes, I think, oh, I'm kind of hungry or oh, I, you know, somebody just texted me and then, you know, I just not doing it anymore. And then I have to force myself to sit back down and do it, which is really hard.

Student 4 did not have an issue in this area:

I'm a very self-disciplined person, so I would get up, get it done. Do whatever I need to do. So, I'll be honest, I really, personally, I didn't really have any difficulties doing that. So yeah, it just kind of came natural to me.

There are times when students need help to finish an assignment. Student 7 outlined this type of struggle:

Especially like if you get into like late day, like, let's say five-ish and it's just like you're working on a hard lesson. It's just like the fatigue will get to you because it's like, I want to be done with this already.

Students learned about themselves and how to deal with their lack of self-discipline while learning online. Student 1 adopted a different mindset and had more of an optimistic view of it. “The only consistency in life is that life is inconsistent... you are going to make mistakes, and you are going to maybe be late on an assignment or you're going to maybe miss an assignment.” An online school can only ask students to do their best. However, a difficult aspect of learning online is for each student to understand their metacognition and how to teach themselves to be self-disciplined to help themselves. Student 8 elaborated when asked about advice for new students coming to an online environment:

I would say probably to kind of view yourself as your own teacher. Yes, you have somebody online with a degree as a teacher, but you are making your plans of how fast or how slow you go with your assignments, but really, like, plan it out and give yourself once again that discipline of you've got to get this and this done by Friday and kind of just see yourself as your own teacher, really.

Student 4 offered the following advice: "Be aware of the self-discipline and the qualities that you have to have to be able to do online school and not be overwhelmed and stressed." Self-discipline is critical when learning online, but it can take time to develop. However, some students enjoy working under the pressure of not having self-discipline. Student 8 added the following when asked about learning about themselves as a student, "I also did learn that I am I can be a hard worker under a good time crunch and can really buckle down whenever it's time to get stuff done." Developing this mental toughness and focus to complete assignments online can positively impact students' current studies and their lives in a post-secondary institution or workforce.

Time-management

Participants continued to discuss the difficulty in time management when first coming to an online school. Although it relates to self-discipline, this quality ensures students can organize their time efficiently to be more productive throughout the day or week. Student 1 described it this way:

Just managing your time like when you're doing. Like when you're doing the assignments or how much you're doing a day but making sure you're doing it in a way that you'll get done when you need to.

Pacing and planning for the week are critical in an online setting. Students must be able to know what is expected for the week, make a schedule, and consistently manage their time wisely. However, this is a difficult quality that students need help with. Student 9 admitted, "At first, I had time management problems. I didn't have anything set up, so I wasn't really prepared." Student 2 also found it difficult: "Just getting used to time management was a little bit more

difficult.” Student 3 argued that trying to complete assignments or work without any time-management skills will not work. “So, I just kind of like dropped around and did stuff whenever, which didn't really work that well, though.” Multiple students struggled in this area, but it improved over time.

Making a schedule involves devising a plan and being prepared for the week, so time-management skills enable students to follow the plan and divide their work throughout the week. The initial transition from an in-person school is a time of trial and error for many. Student 1 explained:

My biggest difficulty during online school was, I would either turn in stuff too early and like rush everything and then realize I'm burnt out by the end of it. Or I'd wait too long thinking I only got a few assignments and not realize that it's longer assignments.

Developing the efficiency skills to determine when to work and how long various assignments will take to complete is difficult. Balancing students' various responsibilities and their schoolwork also proves to be a challenge. Student 8 expressed the inconsistencies that came when working a job and going to an online school:

Once I did get my job, I went back and forth between working morning shifts and night shifts. And so, depending on one or the other, I would either have to be doing my school at night or in the morning. And that caused a lot of procrastination and for some assignments to not be turned in on time.

Managing time wisely with a job and school is a challenge for many students in high school. These issues arise in an online school because students can work anytime throughout the day instead of only after school hours. In these situations, students must manage their time

efficiently, or it will be overwhelming. Student 5 also expressed the inconsistencies in time management:

I'm so used to the structured environment of, like, high school where, you know, you wake up at a certain time every day, get ready for school, go and you know, you're in class at a certain time every day. So that was what really hurt me because, you know, I'd wake up at, you know, 1:00 in the afternoon, 2:00 in the afternoon, and then I'd probably go to work afterwards and then I'd. Come home and I'd be like, Oh, I don't feel like it, you know?

As mentioned in the External Student Qualities common theme, students need help transitioning from an in-person school because the rigid structure takes away the ability to develop other skills. Students are told when to complete assignments and have a schedule made for them throughout the day, except for homework completed after school hours. This is not the case with online students, and it is an area of concern when first coming to an online learning environment.

Students offered varying thoughts and ideas on how to manage their time better. When asked to advise new students coming to an online school, Student 1 offered to It takes time to manage time, and many students understand this after going through the rigors of learning online. Student 4 said, "My best advice is to use your time wisely." Student 1 continued to give more insight into how to manage time better by making room for things that may happen:

Do the schoolwork as early as possible and leave room just in case something does happens because you know, someone got sick or maybe you got sick on a Friday, and you can't turn your assignments in. Then just know that life happens.

An important trait of growing as a student is learning from mistakes. These experiences shape everyone into who they are, but growth occurs if lessons are learned. Even for high school students, learning to manage time is a quality cultivated from failure.

Family Qualities

Participants repeatedly discussed the family as an integral proponent in a student's education. They were asked open-ended questions about this specific theme since previous research found it to be critical for learning in an online environment. Certain subthemes consistently appeared in each focus group, such as (1) Direct family help and (2) Trust. As is the case with in-person students, there are times when families provide direct assistance to students and times when the family trusts the students to be successful in an online school. Focus groups one and three had at least one student with direct family assistance. However, focus groups two and four did not have participants with direct family help. All participants agreed that trust between the family and student is imperative in an online learning environment. Table 3 references the number of participants in each focus group that exhibited these subthemes when coming to an online school.

Table 3

Family qualities as a common theme

	Direct Family Help	Developing Trust
#1 (SOSI)	1/3	3/3
#2 (UOSI)	0/2	2/2
#3 (SOU1)	2/2	2/2
#4 (UOUI)	0/2	2/2

Direct Family Help

Students in focus groups one and three were the only ones who signified that they received direct family assistance with their online schoolwork daily. This is important to note that both focus groups represent successful students in an online setting. However, students in focus groups two and four, which represent unsuccessful students in an online environment, needed more direct family assistance. In some situations, the parents or guardians would sit with the students to help them focus on the task. Student 3 acknowledged, “My mom helped me a lot, like staying on track and not getting distracted as much.” Sometimes, the family would help talk with the students about their work. Student 7 brought in more detail about how the direct assistance was based more on talking with the family member:

I've kind of been calling my dad when I'm stuck on some problems, since it helps easier to kind of talk it out. That's actually what I've found useful is the fact that a lot of my, some of my answers I've actually found through talking it out like out loud.

In either case, direct family involvement helped the students succeed online.

Sometimes, families offer less direct assistance to online students. However, involvement and assistance are imperative, but it can look different for various students. Student 7 explained, “I had like my mom next to me that kind of helping me with some of it. But then after that, it was like more or less me doing it on my own.” Ideally, as is the case with students in brick-and-mortar schools, families begin to take more of an indirect approach to their student’s education. Engagement is critical, but without providing direct assistance. Student 6 went into detail about the progression of family assistance.

She was involved. She helped me when I needed it. But I guess she kind of once a little time progressed, she started to put more trust in me and handle my own responsibilities.

And I would come to her when I needed it.

Keeping an eye on student performance at a distance is easier in an online setting with the addition of parent portals and parent access to student work. However, when direct help is necessary, students need the family more because the online teacher is less available than the in-person teacher. Student 9 also explained how the family helped:

My mom would help me with, like, my projects. Or I'm not the best at math, so I would have her, like, double-check my math assignments. Sometimes I would just come sit out in the kitchen with my mom while she did stuff. And I would just do my work because I like having somebody doing work next to me, like, helping me work.

Sometimes families can help by being present with the students. The lack of teacher presence puts more ownership on the family to assume the responsibility of providing whatever the student needs to be successful. This can look different for each student, meaning families must be engaged in their student's online education, specifically when beginning an online school. Student 8 explained that there are times when the family does not have the technical competency to offer direct support to students.

My grandmother wasn't really involved because she's not that technology oriented. But my dad, he pretty much left it all up to me, but still, you know, reminded me throughout the week, make sure you get on all your assignments done before Friday and kind of just help me guide me throughout the week.

In these cases, there must be a positive relationship between the student and the school or teacher to provide the direct assistance necessary to support the student.

Developing Trust

All participants in each focus group discussed the importance of the family's trust in the students. Even though direct family assistance is vital for some students, overall, families must be able to trust the student to meet the expectations and rigors of an online school. Student 4 explained, "Parents have to consider when they put their children or allow their children to do online school, that they know either, okay, I'm going to have to watch them a lot, or I trust them to do their work." Each student is different and requires various support. Still, trust is critical. Student 2 acknowledged that the family was "not too involved, but involved enough," while Student 1 had check-ins with his family each week: "My parents were kind of the hands-off approach. I told them about my grades and attendance. But other than that, they figured that I got it, and I did." In some instances, as Student 8 said, "My dad just said, you know, make sure you have your assignments done. You're on your own." The student-family dynamic is unique to each student. However, trusting and working with one another is essential.

In most online schools, families receive notifications and communication from teachers or the school regarding student attendance and grades. Or, with the help of online portals and online access, families can keep track of student progress, but there must be trust present to give students ownership of their learning. Student 6 shared an experience on how the interactions with the mother progressed over time:

She had the ability to check in on me and see the e-mails and notifications and things like that. And from time to time, if she noticed something, she would ask me, did you do this

or did you see the announcements or things like that? But as time progressed, it kind of waned off.

Student 1 offered a similar thought about the family's trustworthiness: "They keep track of grades and everything. But in terms of school, I felt like I was just fine doing everything by myself. I didn't ever really need help with anything." However, other students did not have these positive interactions with the family. Student 5 explained how trust was present with the family, but the student lost the trust at various points:

Mom would call me very often and say, have you been doing this? Have you been doing that? Or even worse. She would call me and say, I just got a call from the school... But she never really kept up with anything. And that was just purely because she trusted me and always knew I was doing good.

The dynamic is that students want to be trusted to complete their work, but there will be mistakes and failures. A large part of high school is learning from those mistakes and building those relationships where trust can be present again. Student 4 explained that families will not lose trust in their students: "I think it was one of those things where she just trusted me a lot, and she knew that I was doing what I was supposed to be doing." Family qualities are essential for online student success, but as Student 5 again explained, students must continue to show that they are trustworthy. "She told me before that if she knew that I wouldn't have been doing my work, she never would have let me do online."

School Qualities

Throughout the focus group conversations, participants consistently discussed in detail the school qualities that help students be successful online learners. Even though these are not

qualities of a student, if an online school embodies these characteristics, it allows students to do well in the environment. Through open-ended questioning, five common subthemes were mentioned in each focus group: (1) Flexibility, (2) Technical support, (3) Lack of physicality, (4) Class/school structure, and (5) Teacher communication. Every participant discussed these subthemes in detail except for technical support. Focus groups two and three did not discuss the importance of technical support at any point, while focus group four only had one participant mention it. Table 4 represents each subtheme and how many students in each focus group mentioned the importance of the trait the online school must have to help students be successful.

Table 4

School qualities as a common theme

	Flexibility	Technical support	Lack of physicality	Class structure	Teacher communication
#1 (SOSI)	3/3	3/3	3/3	3/3	3/3
#2 (UOSI)	2/2	1/2	2/3	2/2	2/2
#3 (SOUI)	2/2	0/2	2/2	2/2	2/2
#4 (UOUI)	2/2	1/2	0/2	2/2	2/2

Flexibility

Every student mentioned the flexibility and freedom an online school provides for students and families. Student 2 mentioned, “You could do it anywhere,” while Student 1 acknowledged, “It just opened up a lot more doors and allowed me to have a whole lot more free time, I guess, and allow me to focus on what I want to.” Student 7 wanted to “try something new” instead of the normal routine of an in-person school. Student 4 elaborated even more about the flexibility an online school provided: “I wanted to be able to work more and just have the

freedom to do more things on my time and be able to do school whenever I needed or wanted to.” Even though Student 5 did not utilize his time in an online school well, it was mentioned what should’ve been done because of the flexibility:

You have so much extra time to do things, you know, go and find, go and learn a language. Or go and use the extra time to make a difference because you have all this extra time...Recognize that you have so much more time to do stuff and then use that time to change your life.

The possibilities are endless for students to pursue things outside of school. Online students can schedule their time differently due to the need for a more flexible structure. Student 1 mentioned, “It gets rid of all the fluff, and it's just straight learning and straight freedom, I guess.” There are no class changes or time waiting before and after school. Students can focus on what they need to do and then use the flexibility to do other things that matter to them. Student 2 added, “I mean, you'd spend all day in school working. I think you spent a lot of time that you didn't need to.”

For some, the COVID-19 pandemic was a reason for switching to an online learning environment. Student 8 explained the reasoning behind choosing an online school during the pandemic: “Class just wasn't really the same after COVID, really. And I just wanted to work more after everything. So, I figured online school would be a good choice.” Student 1 added this to the conversation:

It was COVID that started my journey on the online school. So, I was able to just do school at home and not have to worry too much about whether or not I have to miss certain days or if I got quarantined or whatever. I could just focus on what I what I needed to.

Specifically, during the 2020-2021 school year, school districts were tasked with quarantines, sickness, mask-wearing, social distancing, etc. If a student was learning online, students did not have to miss school due to being quarantined or worry about being six feet from a student. Student 9 added, “But after we did online school during COVID, online school was the best option.” Many factors influenced students and families to learn online, but the COVID-19 pandemic allowed students to understand this type of environment.

Online learning is only for some, but it does fit the lifestyle or flexibility of those that want to do things other than school. Student 4 argued against the rigidity of in-person school:

I kind of realized that I didn't like the schedule of going to school, going to a school that I didn't personally really enjoy being in. I didn't enjoy being in the schedule, getting up, going to school, coming home, do homework, eat dinner, go to bed. I didn't like that schedule.

Student 1 enjoyed not having to worry about bringing materials to class and all the items that a student must take to school daily: “It's not like, oh, I forgot my math book at home. It's like I have a laptop. I can do any class I want today.” Student 9 noted the ability to work at an individual pace instead of a pace that the school day dictates:

You're pretty much just like free range for when you get your assignments done and how you learn them and how fast you learn them rather than how the teacher wants to pace the class in person.

There are others where the online school offers an opportunity to escape the social dilemmas at an in-person school. Student 5 explained, “I felt like I didn't have another option.” Social anxiety is a fast-rising issue for many students and families. Online schools offer the flexibility and

freedom to experience a quality education without the interpersonal problems at an in-person school.

Technical Support

Technology dominated certain points throughout focus group one's conversation. As is the case for in-person schools, online schools must be able to provide support and assistance for students and families with technology. The main equipment necessary for an online student is a computer, laptop, or device. On preparing for an online school, Student 2 commented, "We bought a laptop from Best Buy, and that stuck with me throughout the entire time I was in school." Student 3 added, "We needed a printer so you could print it out and fill out the sheet, maybe take a picture of it and turn it in." With technology now, printers are unnecessary, and some students do not utilize them. However, some students prefer to write on paper instead of digitally filling out a form. If students want to write on paper, then the paper must be transferred to a digital format using a scanner or other online program. Student 4 discovered, "Once I figured out how to do that and figured out like programs like Cam Scanner to get PDFs and stuff like that, it was a lot easier." However, this extra time for getting technology to work properly reduces time spent learning the curriculum. Student 1 added, "It takes a little bit more to turn in assignments online because you either have to kind of take it from on paper to get it on a computer or if you're trying to do something on the computer." Online schools must be prepared and willing to help students with any technical problem that could arise early in this environment.

After the initial transition to an online school, more specific problems were encountered, and students discussed different issues. The first and overarching discussion dealt with internet or Wi-Fi issues. Student 1 expressed the following:

Especially where I live, we don't have stable internet. We have to use Star Link, which we like. We got it very nicely, but we have to use Star Link to have stable Wi-Fi around here.

Internet connectivity must be improved across rural areas. If not, some students may be unable to access instruction or even be able to attend online school. Sadly, there needs to be equal access for students to be able to learn in an online setting. With the use of videos and multiple digital programs, the speed of the internet service must also be improved for students across Tennessee. In addition, Student 9 had issues submitting assignments in the learning management system and said, "Some of my assignments got rejected multiple times, like when I would turn it in, and it wouldn't let me submit them." Schools must be prepared to help students with the learning management system and any technical issues because issues will arise at some point. Some students can troubleshoot their technical problems, but others cannot do it on their own. If there is an issue with the curriculum not working properly, the school and staff must be ready promptly support them.

One small detail in the learning management system or class setup can cause many issues. Student 1 mentioned that if one of the first learning tasks is not working properly, it is almost impossible to finish the tasks afterward: "I can't do anything in the entire module because the first assignment has a broken link, and then you're just stuck there sitting for a few days." Online schools provide flexibility, but timely support is needed when students encounter technical issues. If not, it stresses the student and family more while delaying how long students can complete assignments during the week.

Lack of Physicality

Participants commented on the differences between an in-person and an online school. Student 6 phrased this as a “lack of physicality” and helped describe ways online schools can improve by looking at the positive physical qualities of brick-and-mortar schools. Student 3 mentioned the lack “of the interactive things, like...labs and science class.” Student 7 enjoyed the “art/music class” at an in-person school but noted that the same classes in an online setting do not provide the same opportunities. However, some students enjoy the lack of those types of activities. Students choose to be online because of the lack of physicality. Student 8 said, “It kind of just made it a lot easier to ask questions and really grasp the information on.” Sometimes, students are afraid to ask questions in a social setting, so being in an online environment allows them not to feel anxious about talking in front of others. Student 9 added, “In online school, it made it a lot easier to pay attention because I wasn't like around a ton of people.” Allowing students to focus on the curriculum and not worry about what others think is because of the lack of physicality in an online setting.

There need to be more interactive tasks in classes and more interactions with the teacher. Student 5 argued that in-person classes can engage and challenge students more by saying, “I feel like they have the opportunity to engage people more and then therefore ask and do harder material.” Other participants mentioned the relationships as the biggest difference between in-person and online school. Student 4 commented, “I mean it's easier to make people interact and make sure that really they do understand it” while Student 6 mentioned, “Not being able to just quickly raise your hand or look to your left and have a student you can talk to.” These interactions between students do not happen as much in an online environment, but some students need others to talk to about the content to understand the curriculum.

The other critical relationship is with the teacher. Multiple participants mentioned this as a difficult transition piece. Student 3 discussed this by saying, “Not having the one-on-one relationship with the teacher, like not being in the same room with each other,” and how it takes away some aspects of the learning experience for students. Student 5 outlined how there is an effort to ask for help instead of a teacher checking on a student during class, “If you need help, you have to be able to ask for it.” Some students have difficulty reaching out for help or do not see a need to talk to the teacher. Student 8 never talked to the teachers apart from email, “I never talked to my teachers besides through email. And they do have class times, you know, like office hours or whatever. I just never went to them.” The lack of teacher interaction made it difficult for some students. Student 5 had multiple observations about this subject:

I really think the biggest difference is just not being around people all the time, being around a physical teacher to kind of look over and be like, hey, do you need help? You're doing this wrong, or something like that.

In addition to the lack of direct assistance from a teacher, Student 5 also mentioned how it does help when there is no clear understanding or agreement between the student and teacher in an online school:

Make a contract with the teacher. You're not making a contract physically, but like, I'm going to do the work. You know, I met them. They kind of have the bond to where, you know, like who they are. You're acquainted with them.

This lack of a “contract” describes the dynamic that does not exist as much as in an in-person school. However, it looks different in an online setting. Student 5 also believed the teacher could get more out of and challenge a student in a brick-and-mortar school. However, more than

anything, there must be a concerted effort from the student to develop a relationship with the teachers. Teachers can reach out by email or digital communication, but students are not forced to respond consistently. In a physical classroom, communication is not optional for the student.

Class Structure

How school, class, and assignments are structured in an online school was discussed at length in the focus groups. As mentioned, students and families choose this type of environment because of its flexibility and freedom. However, if they must abide by a stringent schedule where students must work at specific times, it takes a large value of online schools. Student 1 started the conversation:

I worried a lot more in public school, whether or not I turned in my stuff or if I had my right materials and stuff. And I didn't have to do that in online school. I guess since it's all online, it's all there.

The online school the participant attended is asynchronous and has weekly due dates. However, teachers would lay out an ideal schedule for students to follow each week in every class. If the pacing guide is followed, the student can finish everything for the week in the specific time frame. Student 2 mentioned, “Teachers started implementing the Monday, Tuesday, Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday, which was very helpful.” In addition, Student 1 liked how teachers laid “out their modules in a way that makes sense, and they have pacing guides.”

In addition to the layout of the online class, the teacher's personalized touch also positively impacted student learning. The conversation from Student 5 described how a specific teacher engaged the students with the videos that were made throughout the week:

He made these videos that was specifically talking about what we were doing, kind of what he expected. And that just works really well for online students. It lets them know straight up what he wants, what he's thinking.... he could appeal to people with a creative side. He had another sort of science, you know, people like that.

When teachers and classes are personalized, students see the teachers and their thinking processes. Student 6 offered the following advice for teachers:

I like videos kind of going over a simple explanation about the lessons...I would probably be confused about the lessons that are going on now. So, just like stuff beforehand to kind of explain what to expect throughout the course.

Student 1 echoed this sentiment about teachers making personal videos, “But some teachers, I think, do a really good job making their own videos and making it interesting. You can tell when teachers put more effort into it. It makes it a lot more enjoyable.” In addition to personal videos, Student 4 asked for more learning outside the normal curriculum, “including some more things to your learning that are outside of a textbook.” These are specific qualities that a teacher can implement in an online course, but there are other thoughts from the participants on how there can be an improvement in learning online.

Class structure can negatively affect student engagement and learning as well. Student 2 argued that some classes “have almost a high learning curve to really get used to doing the course,” This is due to the programs or other resources that online teachers use. It can take time to understand how to use them. Student 9 wanted to see entire units unlocked at one time instead of the weekly modules: “I wish that the units were posted all at once, like one unit by unit, so that I could do all that information, you know, at my own pace instead of having to wait a week

for more work.” Student 3 added, “Some teachers make it where the assignments are locked until you do the one before it, which I understand, like keep your students on track and not skip ahead.” Student 4 echoed this idea by saying certain teachers “would have assignments locked if you hadn't completed the previous assignments.” Students could not look ahead in some classes, which took away the opportunity to prepare for the rest of the week. Student 2 acknowledged that some online classes were organized differently: “Just the way different assignments are set up. And I don't know some of the classes I've had, it's just been logically confusing, which makes it more difficult to do some of the work.” Teachers need to be cognizant of the students and remember that there are ways in which classroom structure limits the freedom of the student to do other things outside of school.

As with brick-and-mortar schools, the teacher plays a critical role in student learning, even online. Student 5 again emphasized one teacher that made the online class enjoyable and challenging by saying there was “something about his character that just strikes me as, like, a very curious and intelligent person. I guess I could relate to him somewhat.” Student 4 gave the following advice for online teachers and their classrooms:

Have an open, fun personality. It makes your students more motivated and less stressed to come to you about something because sometimes teachers make you feel like if you come to them, you're kind of get scolded because, yeah, they might have explained it in their post, but it's not your fault that you didn't understand it.

Even if videos are utilized in an online class, students may still need to raise questions about the expectations and content. The structure, clear expectations, teacher personality, and types of assignments are critical for students to be successful.

Teacher Communication

All participants in each focus group noted the importance of teacher communication when first coming to an online school. Student 4 offered, “If you need help, you have to be able to ask for it.” This differs from an in-person school since teachers will communicate directly with students. However, if students need more assistance, they must reach out as Student 7 explained, “You can still contact teachers at any time.” It is important to understand that not all teachers are available at any point to answer questions or provide support. Still, most teachers in an online setting quickly respond to student communication. The convenience of this learning environment is that teachers can give their students one-on-one assistance without other students knowing. Students can go into detail about their current situation, and others are not there to criticize or ridicule them. Student 3 noted, “Some teachers are great at listening, and some teachers are great at being there.” Student 6 explained how one teacher went above and beyond to help:

She did very good in helping me and I guess the other students in the course to get organized so that it wouldn't be stressful, and it still allowed me to follow that schedule and still have time for work and other things that I wanted to do.

This teacher was available and willing to help students be successful, but the students had to reach out and say they needed help. Student 8 rarely reached out to teachers but knew the times they were immediately available for support: “I never talked to my teachers besides, like, through email, you know? And they do have, like, office hours or whatever. I just never went to them.” During office hours, teachers are prepared and present to answer questions immediately. In the school the participants attended, each teacher was required to have at least two different times throughout the week when they were available. However, some students utilized these

times, while others did not. Regardless, an essential piece of online learning depends on teacher communication, as Student 9 described: “I really do think that the teachers were very helpful with everything. They were mostly very easy to access. You could talk to, email them, and they would get back to you as soon as possible.”

Even though all participants mentioned that their online teachers were very quick to respond, they had a couple of suggestions to help open the lines of communication with teachers. Student 4 suggested the following:

Just occasionally reaching out to your students and just reminding them like, hey, if you're having a problem, if you're having trouble, like, please reach out to me. It will not be an issue. I'll be happy to help you, just acknowledging that you will be there to help your students along the way.

Teachers can reach out more to their students to check on them and their progress. Sometimes, students will not ask for help, so teachers may need to start the conversation online. Student 7 also suggested “More focus groups and like, one-on-ones with teachers. It's like a weekly sort of checkup from time to time.” Even though office hours are times for students to reach out to the teachers, perhaps teachers need to take more initiative in reaching out to their students at specific times. Student 8 added this suggestion:

If every student could have a meeting with a teacher once or twice a week, one-on-one, like a scheduled plan, just so the student could go over the content or ask any questions. It could be like a 15–20-minute call, and just have that opportunity for each student to have that one-on-one.

Specifically, if a student is new to online learning or the format, having that time with the teacher could be beneficial where things are communicated instead of through email.

Teacher communication is vital for student success in an online learning environment. However, there must be communication between the student, teacher, and family. Student 1 encouraged new students to:

Talk to your teachers. I mean, it's not the end of the world. Like, even if you're like a day late, I mean, they are pretty understanding if you tell them. I mean, life happens whether you want it to or not.

It appears to be straightforward, but communication is key. It is the same in a brick-and-mortar school but in a different medium. An even better option is for students to talk to each other and provide support for everyone at the school. Student 4 explained it this way:

So, I think just providing resources and, like, talking personally to the people that are in your school to kind of make them feel like you're there for them, you're there to help them, like, they're not just another student on a computer.

Students must learn to communicate with their teachers and with one another in an online environment. Sometimes, students do not have questions or need support, but initiating conversations with their teachers starts the communication cycle. Students can be successful if an online school provides time and space to have these conversations with teachers and their peers.

Chapter 5

Summary of Findings, Discussions, Recommendations, and Conclusions

Online learning has changed since its beginnings as distance learning in the 1990s. It continues to evolve, but more students are choosing this environment due to the flexibility it can provide. Over 4.7 million students are enrolled virtually in at least a part-time status (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Because of this growth and interest in online schools, there is a need for students and families to understand what is necessary when coming to this type of learning environment. Once the choice is made to transition to an online setting from in-person, it can take time for students to succeed initially. This study investigated the student behaviors linked to successful transitioning from an in-person to an online school. The qualitative study utilized four focus groups, and they were divided based on student success in a brick-and-mortar setting and success in an online environment. In addition, there were discussions between participants concerning their experiences when first coming to an online school. Chapter 5 summarizes the findings from those conversations with recommendations for future research.

This study has two guiding research questions. First, what behaviors do students need to transition from in-person to online learning successfully? Secondly, what supports can help increase students' likelihood of success in an online environment?

The qualitative data for this research were gathered from focus group discussions. Focus groups were chosen for this study because it allows students to share their experiences when transitioning to an online school. As Merriam & Tisdell (2016) point out, "focus groups are appropriate to be used when this is the best way to get the best data that addresses your research

question” (p. 115). All participants were current 10th, 11th, or 12th-grade students or recently graduated students at the public online school. Based on previous TNReady assessments at in-person and online schools, they were divided into four groups. These were utilized to identify the differences in student behaviors based on their various levels of success at the in-person and online schools. Each focus group session was recorded, transcribed, and coded to determine common themes and their subthemes.

Summary of Findings

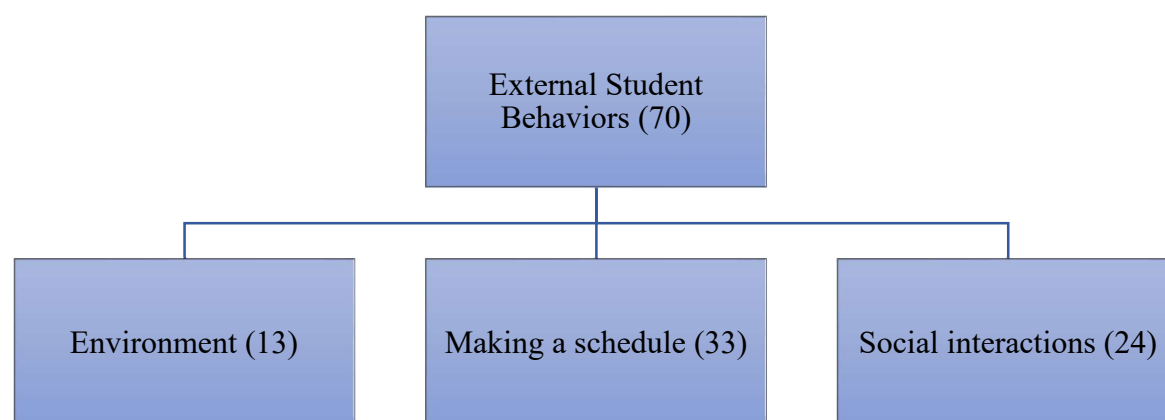
The findings from this study were coded into multiple common themes and subthemes. These are presented in this section. They result from the participant’s responses from each focus group's transcription and coding process. Chapter 4 outlined the qualitative data and how it was divided into the following themes.

Themes regarding external student behaviors

A common theme presented throughout the focus group discussions related to the student’s preparation to learn or external student behaviors. These encompass the behaviors and commonalities in setting up a proper work environment for online learning. A location designated only for completing assignments is vital, but attending an online school requires more than an office space. Online learning is flexible and allows students to work wherever they are located. However, there are things that students can do to create a physical atmosphere conducive to learning. As noted in Chapter 4, Focus Groups 1 and 3 (the successful online students) emphasized the importance of the physical work environment and making a schedule. Figure 1 below identifies the common and subthemes of the external student behaviors while including how many times they were coded from the focus group transcriptions.

Figure 1

Coded Themes Regarding External Student Behaviors



**Note.* The numbers in parentheses represent the total number of codes for each subtheme

When learning online, students are prepared to work wherever they are located. Some students work in an office, kitchen, bedroom, basement, car, or anywhere they can. The main idea is that students find a place to focus on their assignments and away from distractions. This environment can be a different space daily, but it needs to be free of distractions or items that could break student concentration. More than anything, whatever room or setting is used for students to work in, they must be able to focus on their assignments. The environment plays a critical role in online learning because it is a place where students can focus on what is essential. Successful online students would have consistent workplaces each day or locations where they could control what was happening around them.

The ability to plan assignments for the week and have an idea of what to expect is another behavior the participants consistently discussed. This involved making a schedule or

planning out the assignments for the week. When transitioning to an online school, most students did not make a schedule or prepare for learning. With a plan for the week, students could grasp how to complete the assignments consistently. Focus Groups 1 and 3 were the only groups with students who planned their week. However, it looked different for participants because students personalized a schedule that worked for them and their families. Some students tried to complete their assignments in fewer days than the usual five-day week schedule. However, this meant more time was spent on assignments throughout the day. Other students would work on one class at a time and finish the entire week's assignments in one sitting. Not all students completed their work for the week in this manner, but multiple students in the focus groups utilized it. Once students got into a routine and understood what worked best for them, these weekly schedules varied from student to student.

When learning online, all participants mentioned the importance of continuing to interact socially with others. When enrolled in a virtual school, it is easy not to be intentional about connecting with friends or being involved in extra-curricular activities outside of school. As a result, students tend to be more isolated, but most need to interact and connect with others. This can look different for each student. Most of the participants interviewed worked a part-time job, which is one way for students to continue socializing. For others, it is going to the library, playing a sport, or any opportunity to interact with others. As always, there are exceptions to this, and some students flourish without social interactions. However, it all depends on what the student needs or does not need.

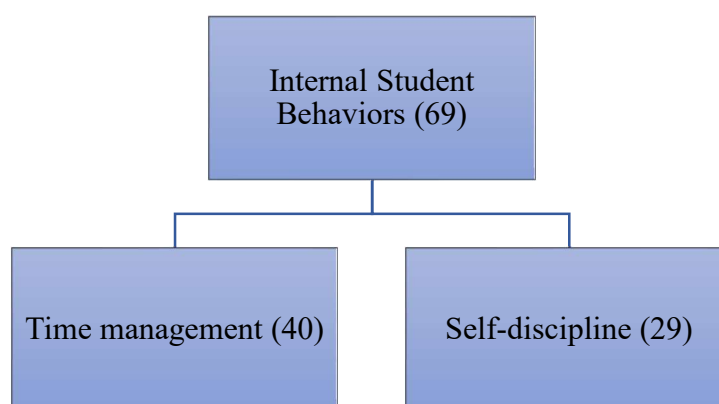
Themes regarding internal student behaviors

The second common theme throughout the focus group conversations was internal student behaviors, including time management and self-discipline. Both successful online focus

groups identified these as critical to online learning and that they are learned behaviors students do not automatically have when attending an online school. One reason for this is the rigid schedule an in-person school provides, so students need an opportunity to increase their capacity. However, most participants mentioned that developing these behaviors took time and effort once they began learning online. Figure 2 below identifies the common and subthemes of the internal student behaviors while including how many times they were coded from the focus group transcriptions.

Figure 2

Coded Themes Regarding Internal Student Behaviors



**Note.* The numbers in parentheses represent the total number of codes for each subtheme

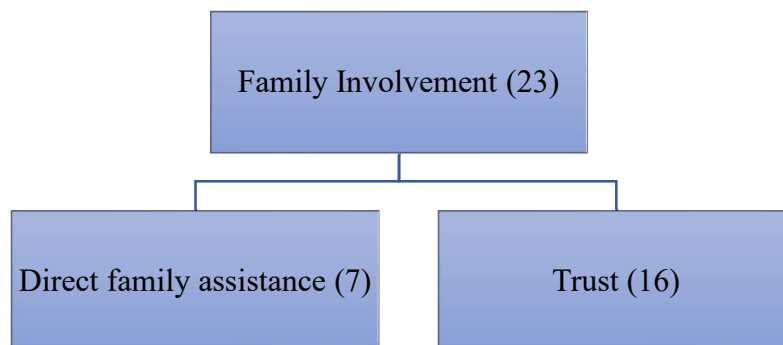
All successful online students in Focus Groups 1 and 3 noted the importance of self-discipline. Successful students can force themselves to complete assignments on time and consistently stick to their created schedule. Developing the focus and determination to plan and schedule always is difficult. It takes time to develop these, but it can be done with experience and receiving help from either their teachers or families. Students can quickly get overwhelmed or stressed, which can cause students to get behind on their coursework or need help

understanding a concept. However, students must focus on the task and seek assistance from others. Of course, things will go wrong, and mistakes will happen while learning online, but students must be able to adapt when errors are made.

The other behavior successful students mentioned in the focus groups was time-management. All participants acknowledged that this is a critical part of successfully learning in an online environment. Even though this is connected to making a schedule for the week, time management is the follow-through and discipline to follow the plan. For example, one issue students had was predicting how long assignments would take. Even though the teacher at the school provided a pacing guide for students to complete all assigned tasks by the end of the week, sometimes the lessons take longer than what is suggested. Time management allows students to be able to adjust when things do not go how they expect.

Themes regarding family qualities

The third common theme throughout the focus group conversations was family involvement. Family engagement in online school is critical to student success as with in-person school. However, this looks different for each student and family. For example, students may need the direct assistance of their family since they are online and need someone in front of them to help. Or it could be that the student does not require direct support but only family support at a distance. This would entail the family trusting the students to complete their assignments on time and do what is necessary to be successful. In addition, the family needs to be engaged in student learning for accountability in the household. Figure 3 below identifies the common and subthemes of family qualities, including how many times they were coded from the focus group transcriptions.

Figure 3*Coded Themes Regarding Family Qualities*

**Note.* The numbers in parentheses represent the total number of codes for each subtheme

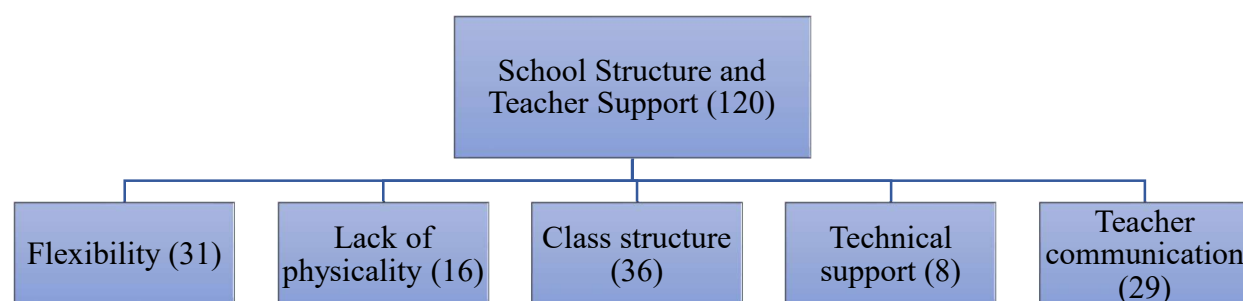
The only participants to acknowledge that direct family assistance is critical for online students were from Focus Groups 1 and 3. Essentially, this means students working with their families to ensure everything is turned in and that they comprehend the curriculum. Some students need this support, even with teachers available throughout the day. They may need someone beside them to guide them or keep their focus. This can benefit students once they initially transition to an online setting if they are not used to the environment. However, direct family assistance can decrease once a student gets accustomed and properly adjusted. Family support can evolve into an as-needed approach. It is important to note that not all students have families that can provide the support necessary. In these cases, students must lean on their teachers and others for timely help in their learning.

All participants in the study mentioned how imperative trust is when learning online. As is the case with students in a brick-and-mortar school, many families disengage once students reach the middle or high school setting. However, families must be involved in their student's education, which looks different for each student. In addition, high school students need

accountability at home, specifically in an online school. Still, families must decide how to handle this accountability best. The result is a trustworthy relationship between students and families, where both can discuss the learning occurring throughout the week.

Themes regarding school qualities

The fourth and final theme of the study involved the qualities of the school and teacher. Students and families decide on an online setting because they think it fits their needs the best. However, there are ways the school and online classrooms can be structured to help accommodate these needs. If an online school tries to function like an in-person school, it removes the online environment's purpose, except for the students who need help to handle the social aspects a brick-and-mortar school provides. Each focus group discussed the following subthemes: flexibility, lack of physicality, class structure, technical assistance, and teacher communication. Figure 4 below identifies the common and subthemes of school structure and teacher support while including how many times they were coded from the focus group transcriptions.

Figure 4*Coded Themes Regarding School Qualities*

**Note.* The numbers in parentheses represent the total number of codes for each subtheme

Online schools, particularly in the secondary setting, allow students and families the flexibility to learn independently. Most participants were introduced to online learning during the COVID-19 pandemic and enjoyed the freedom to work at their own pace and time. They could do activities that students in a brick-and-mortar setting could not do. For most focus group participants, this meant they could work a job, while others enjoyed working on their schoolwork at various points throughout the day or night. In addition, students have all the materials and resources available online when attending an online school.

A “lack of physicality” was mentioned throughout the focus groups. In some instances, this can be seen as a negative, but there are examples where this can also be a positive. For example, without other individuals being present with the online student, it helps some students to focus on what they are learning without the distractions of others. However, some classes or experiences are limited to a brick-and-mortar school, such as chorus, band, music, etc. In addition, classroom teacher-to-student and student-to-student dialogue is an essential educational

quality. Still, it is not present in online schools apart from discussion boards, video discussions, or direct communication with the teacher. Another concern is how students need to ask for help in an online setting. If a student is struggling, unless the student reaches out, the teacher does not know until assignments are either not submitted or completed incorrectly.

How teachers structure the online classroom can also improve the overall online school experience. Participants mentioned many things that they found discouraging while learning online. First, online teachers need to structure their lessons and clearly outline the expectations for the week. One way to do this is for teachers to make an overview video or page for the week. These help students navigate their week and are designed to keep them on track each day so they will complete everything by the end of the week. Also, teachers did a few things that limited students' flexibility, such as locking lessons where students could not access them unless other tasks were completed first. If a class is structured this way, it limits the student's ability to see what the assignment will be like so they can plan accordingly. Also, even though high-quality instructional materials are necessary, using resources outside the classroom can help pull lessons and units together for the students to understand the curriculum better. Finally, participants wanted teachers to "have an open, fun personality" when designing online courses. When courses are personalized and frequently updated, it lets students see that care and effort are placed into online learning.

Teacher communication can be critical for online learners. There are opportunities for students to reach out to teachers at any point in the day, but the students also need to respond to teacher feedback and communication. This two-way communication is vital in an online environment. One idea presented was for teachers to have more one-on-one time or specific

check-in times with students. Teachers are there to help and support students as much as possible, but it requires efficient communication between the student and the teacher.

Discussion of Findings

This portion of the study will provide student behaviors that can help them succeed when entering an online school. This information can be critical for online schools and higher education institutions utilizing online classes as course offerings. In addition, school leaders, educators, and families can use this information to understand what it takes to learn online. The core areas of this discussion are (1) creating a conducive learning environment, (2) making a schedule, (3) social interactions, (4) focus and determination, (5) family engagement, (6) online teacher importance, and (7) school and class structure. The first four core areas are student behaviors that can help students transition to an online school. At the same time, the last three are areas of support from the family, teacher, or school to help students transition to an online environment.

The theoretical framework for this study is Self-Regulated Learning Theory. The core areas align with the self-regulated learning (SRL) skills that Wong et al. (2019) point out. These SRL strategies are metacognition, time management, effort regulation, critical thinking, elaboration, rehearsal, organization, help-seeking, and peer learning. The authors mention that these are necessary for all types of education, but “metacognition, time management, effort regulation, and critical thinking were related to online academic success” (p. 357).

Metacognition and time management help students find the focus and determination needed for online learning. At the same time, effort regulation encompasses making a schedule, creating a conducive learning environment, and students’ social interactions. Critical thinking is a skill not

directly mentioned in these findings, but it comes with how the teacher structures how the student is learning in this environment.

Creating a conducive learning environment

As all participants from Focus Group 1 and one from Focus Group 3 mentioned, the work environment is critical to student success. The study's only participants who said this were students who successfully transitioned from in-person to online learning. Overall, students discussed how they worked in a space that was quiet and free of distractions. This included disregarding any item that could cause disruptions and get the student off-task. Even though students need to take breaks and refocus their minds on learning, an environment that does not risk the possibility of disrupting their education is critical. For some students, this includes working in their bedroom or an office at their house. Others need to work with others present, such as a parent or guardian, while some prefer to work away from everyone else. The most important item is to find a space that works for the student and family.

Learning in an online environment provides students the freedom to decide how to work best. Instead of being in a brick-and-mortar school where students are made to attend certain classes at various times, students in an online setting can choose to work wherever they want. However, this also allows students to be distracted and lose focus on what is essential. When students first come to an online learning environment, they lose sight of creating a space solely designated as a learning space. More than anything, they need a mindset where they can work free of outside distractions. It could be as simple as wearing headphones and listening to music or some ambiance to "distract the distractions," as one participant mentioned. Each member of the first focus group could work wherever they were by avoiding things that could take their time

away that other students struggled with. This study highlighted that creating a conducive work environment is essential and that students must find places to focus solely on their learning.

Making a schedule

Successful online learners consistently mentioned the necessity of making and keeping a schedule. This schedule outlines the responsibilities and expectations the student must follow daily to complete assignments by the due date. As the participants in the study mentioned, this schedule can look different for each student, but the key is to have a schedule before the work starts. Online learners are not accustomed to creating their schedules and learning independently. In a brick-and-mortar school, the plan and expectations are easily communicated by the bell schedule and daily agenda in each classroom. However, classroom instruction and assignments are available for students to complete independently in an asynchronous online environment. Still, it is up to the student to design and follow a personalized schedule. The rigidity of a typical in-person school does not allow students to create, design, fix, or fail at making individual schedules. This is an area where families can help tremendously. As Keaton & Gilbert (2020) point out, “organization was the area that parents seem to help the least according to students” (p.144). When a student is transitioning to an online school, families can immensely help students make a schedule for the week with the goal of students eventually learning how to do it on their own.

Crafting and designing an individual schedule takes time and effort at the front end of the week. This needs to take place before the student begins to work so that they can ensure everything is completed and submitted by the end of the week. In addition, the student and family will need to try various methods. Some participants in the study mentioned that they treated their schedule like a typical school day and worked on each class for a specific amount of

time during the day. Others preferred focusing on one subject at a time to dig deeper into the content. In either case, it is critical for online students to always think about their schedules and discover what works for their individual learning needs. More importantly, if a plan does not function the way the student likes, they must try something else the following week. There will be a constant need to adjust and personalize it based on their preferences and comforts. If students want to work later in the day, this needs to be noted in the schedule. If students wish to try and complete the assignments earlier in the week, this must be in the schedule. If students need to work or have obligations at various times throughout the week, their schedule needs to be adjusted. Even more, successful online students give extra time in their schedule if things happen later in the week or closer to the due date. Emergencies or circumstances can dictate plans, but students are prepared if the contingencies are built into their routines. Mistakes and failures will occur when students learn online, but they must have a plan and adjust each week accordingly.

Social interactions

All focus groups but one mentioned the importance of online students continuing to interact with others in social settings. Focus group one did not directly discuss this topic in their conversations, perhaps because they were successful in both in-person and online environments and did not see it as necessary. Also, there were peer-to-peer interactions with classmates through class discussion boards or chats. However, they did say that they either worked a job, participated in a hobby, or went to various places to learn. This alone signified that they were not isolated from their peers or the outside world. The other participants were confident that all online students need social interaction, whether by interacting with their friends consistently or doing activities outside their homes. Online students must seek opportunities to be involved with

extra-curricular activities outside of school. Virtual schools can provide some social activities for students, but the student and families must be willing to do things outside of their homes so that students can develop and grow their social skills. This could involve going to the public library, pursuing a sport or hobby, working a job, being involved with local organizations such as a church or the YMCA, etc. There are multiple options for students to be involved in their local community and make a positive impact. As one participant mentioned, there is more freedom and flexibility in an asynchronous online school, and students need to use this time to make a difference.

Online students want to avoid being involved with their peers in some situations. Online schools allow them to disengage from the social setting due to their previous negative experiences in a brick-and-mortar school, such as bullying, harassment, etc. There needs to be more trust in others, and online schools provide an opportunity to build this back slowly. However, in these situations, students must try to be involved with others as much as possible. Part of the educational experience is learning to interact and build those soft communication skills with peers. These opportunities are only present if a student does something outside an online school. There are extreme situations where students are not ready for these social interactions. This is understandable, but they need to develop positive peer relationships eventually. If students cannot incorporate these social interactions independently, changing to a synchronous or hybrid online school may be necessary for the student's overall well-being. Or a change to an in-person school is what students need most to maintain peer interactions. Online school is not for everyone, but it can be if they are willing to put forth more effort to create an environment that benefits them.

Focus and determination

All successful online learners from the focus group conversations identified that time management and self-discipline are critical when learning in this environment. These two behaviors, like making a schedule, are problematic for students to do independently. One of the main reasons for this is that most new online students need to gain experience with managing their time or having to focus intently on their studies. These two behaviors are learned through practice and experience, but it does come naturally for some students. If students have a proper learning environment free of distractions and make a schedule for the week, it may be all that is needed. However, for most online students, time management and self-discipline come from having the proper mindset. Wong et al. (2019) describe this when discussing the essential attributes of online learning: “metacognition, time management, effort regulation, and critical thinking were related to online academic success” (p. 357). These self-regulated strategies help students stay on task and focus on their learning.

“Focus” and “determination” were consistently used in each focus group conversation. Students will encounter technical issues, communication problems, and issues understanding the content at times. However, students must be disciplined to persist and progress in their learning when encountering setbacks. When students have other activities or responsibilities outside of school, they must be able to manage their time wisely to focus on their current assignments. Asynchronous online schools allow students to pursue other opportunities and passions during the regular school day. However, to succeed, one must manage their time efficiently and discipline themselves to focus on learning. It takes time and practice to get to a point where they can do this by themselves, but it is possible with the help of their families and growing from their failures. Once they discover how to manage their time and prioritize or focus on their education, students can thrive in an online learning environment.

Family engagement

The family plays a critical role in any student's education. Ricker et al. (2021) noted a "significant relationship in student performance across the elementary, middle, and high school band" with parent involvement (p. 197). Family engagement is just as critical for online students. It is important to note that the family means anyone in the household, and it looks different for each student. However, there needs to be at least one older adult to help keep the student accountable for education. Most participants had one parent, aunt, grandparent, or anyone they could turn to for support. These individuals frequently encouraged, supported, and trusted the students in their studies. In some cases, families struggle to be engaged in their student's learning and provide the support necessary for them to be successful. As Keaton & Gilbert (2020) mention, schools must be able to train parents on how to help their students in these situations. Families are essential to online learning, and if they need to know how to support their students, schools must be prepared to coach them on how to be involved in an online learning environment.

In this study, the only participants who mentioned direct family assistance during the study were successful online students. Early on, when a student transitions from an in-person to an online school, the family must be able to provide direct help to the student. Due to the lack of physicality with the teacher, families must assume most responsibility for providing immediate student support. The online school should be able to provide some assistance, but the family must be there for help, so the student feels confident to move forward in their learning. This can be as simple as helping the student set up a schedule, creating a learning conducive learning environment, assisting with technical issues, or providing academic support with the curriculum. Sometimes, this could require the family to sit with the student daily and be there for help. The

goal is for students to become self-sufficient or self-regulated learners, but this takes time and experience for students to be successful.

All participants mentioned the importance of a trusting relationship between the student and family as an essential aspect of learning online. This involved the family frequently checking in with the students and allowing them to do what they think is best for their learning. One of the most common ways is for families to access a parent portal or observe student progress throughout the week. Ricker et al. (2021) noted that the more parents logged in and monitored their student's work on the Learning Management System, the more successful the students were in class. Trusting that the student completes and submits their work is essential but trust also involves accountability. In addition, trust is an earned behavior. If students continue not to follow expectations, they must earn that trust back, and the family may need to provide more direct assistance until the students show they can do it on their own. Ultimately, the trust between the student and the family is the foundation of lasting success in an online setting.

Online teacher importance

As in any educational setting, the teacher plays a crucial role in an online learning environment and in engaging students in their learning. Even more, Kelly & Lock (2021) note that "a strong teacher presence that fosters a supportive environment is fundamental to student engagement and success" (p. 56). Being present in an online course can be challenging. Still, there are ways for teachers to be available while teaching online. For one, all participants from the focus groups described how certain teachers would personalize their instruction and not solely rely on the curriculum or resources. Even online, students desire to see their teacher and their personality. Therefore, when designing their courses, teachers can use a variety of graphics, dynamic instructional videos, and resources outside of the regular curriculum or textbook. These

small but critical details can help students to enjoy the content they are learning about and engage them in the instruction.

Teachers are essential in communicating with online students and families. Teachers can't respond immediately to every email or message, but online learners feel crucial to their teachers if they are consistently available and efficiently help. It is difficult for the teacher-student relationship to thrive in an online setting primarily because students must also respond to teacher communication. If students do not communicate with their teachers, less learning occurs due to their lack of dialogue. One area this can help is through high-quality teacher feedback on assignments. If students do not look at teacher feedback on their assignments, there cannot be a conversation about how to improve. Teacher communication is critical, but successful students consistently communicate with the teacher.

Many unsuccessful online learners in the focus groups requested check-in times with their teachers throughout the week. Even though the online school had days and times when teachers were immediately available through office hours, the students still had to reach out for themselves during this time. It would benefit the students, teachers, and school if online educators had specific times for students to check in with them, specifically if these were new online students. This would allow the students and teachers to communicate and develop the relationship essential for student success. One way this could be accomplished is through a mentor or if each student had a specific teacher to connect with each week. Weems-Landingham & Paternite (2021) encourage teachers to check in with their students for asynchronous online discussions at the beginning, middle, and end times. This would give students a positive interaction with at least one of their teachers and additional support in their online learning experience.

School and class structure

Online schools provide flexibility and freedom for students to do things outside the typical school day, such as hobbies, athletics, a job, etc. Synchronous schools are less flexible due to the scheduled live classes where students must be on the computer at a specific time. Asynchronous schools provide the most freedom because the students can learn when it benefits them within the confines of the school expectations. Some schools have weekly due dates, while others have daily time requirements. Students and families must understand the expectations and limitations of the virtual school before enrolling. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, there is a misconception that online learning is easy and does not require much work. However, high-quality online schools are more challenging and require different skills or behaviors than typical brick-and-mortar schools.

There are certain things that online schools can do to increase the flexibility it provides. For example, multiple participants mentioned how certain classes were difficult to navigate. Therefore, ensuring the online course is easy to navigate is critical. In addition, the courses must be clear with expectations and what is expected throughout the week or unit. This saves the student and family time by not searching for what is expected and how to complete it. Most courses provide a detailed video and weekly goals by explaining these items and some typical problems that may arise during the lessons. Teachers are encouraged to use resources outside of the regular curriculum, but in doing so, they must try to embed these within the LMS as much as possible. This limits the number of windows or tabs that students open, which also reduces the possibility of distractions.

Participants from the focus groups mentioned the difficulty in seeing learning tasks or lessons assigned to complete later in the week. This is important because it gives them an idea of

what to expect regarding time and energy to spend throughout the week. For the students to see future assignments or tasks, they had to submit the previous tasks. The course was set up this way to ensure the students complete everything in sequential order, and this helps the students understand the curriculum more efficiently. However, it also takes some of the flexibility away from the students by not allowing them to see what to expect for the week. Once a student gets to an assignment or task, sometimes it takes more time to comprehend the directions than what the teacher initially planned. Understandably, teachers want students to receive the material in a specific order, but the ability of the student to make a precise plan for the week is limited. Allowing students to access all assignments for the week places trust in students. If a student needs to follow the pacing or expectations for the week, then the teacher can coach or direct them to do better next time. Consistency is critical in an online setting because it allows students to know what to expect and how to meet their weekly goals.

Limitations of the Study

This study was limited in various areas. One was by only focusing on the focus group conversations and the differences in explained behaviors between the participants. No other data were collected from them. In addition, there were only nine participants from the same online school with a total enrollment of around 250 students. This study only focused on students in grades 9-12 and had no participants younger than 10th grade. The participants comprised four females, five males, and one student with a 504 plan, but none had an IEP. In some areas, diverse groups were represented, but not in others. The school is in Northeast Tennessee, but the participants are located across the state. However, this is one region and does not represent all online schools. Finally, the online school the participants attended was a mostly asynchronous

school with weekly due dates. Virtual schools can be structured differently, but this study focused on the student experiences at a single school.

Conclusions

This study's primary conclusion is that some behaviors are necessary for students transitioning from an in-person school to be successful online students. These behaviors can also be developed with practice, time, and effort. In addition, students need time and support from their families and school to develop these behaviors. Some students have the ability or have already learned these behaviors and are successful online learners, but others will need assistance. Even though online or virtual schools are new to education, especially since the COVID-19 pandemic, online schools need to provide a rigorous and high-quality education for students that choose these schools. Online schools provide different opportunities for students and families than previously offered, but they need to develop and support these successful online behaviors so that online students can flourish.

Gaining student and family feedback on online learning is also critical to improving virtual schools. In addition, the conversations and data from stakeholders can be valuable in determining areas of strength and weakness. From this study, successful online students described the behaviors that enabled them to do well in this environment. In contrast, unsuccessful students explained other support they needed to be successful. Even though some students appreciate the freedom and flexibility online school provides, online schools need to be prepared to accommodate as many students as possible. It is challenging because, as this study showed, all students work differently, and it is a series of attempts to get everything in place for them to be successful. However, the virtual school can establish various support processes and be ready to coach students to develop these successful behaviors.

Recommendations for Practice

As mentioned throughout this study, some behaviors help students navigate the rigors of online learning successfully. In addition, steps can be taken to help students and families transition from an in-person to an online school. The following practice recommendations can be utilized by the student, family, teacher, and online school to help build the student's online learning competency:

- It is recommended that online schools ensure students know how to create a conducive learning environment wherever they are located.
- It is recommended that online schools help students to create and show their weekly schedule to a teacher to receive feedback and support.
- Online schools try to develop student mindsets by finding ways to increase focus and determination.
- Families need to continue to provide social interactions for the students throughout their time in a virtual school.
- When a student first transitions to an online school, the family may need to provide direct assistance with making a schedule, setting up a conducive learning environment, and helping with immediate difficulties.
- It is recommended that online teachers structure their classes to allow students as much flexibility as possible.
- Communication between students, families, teachers, and the school needs to be efficient and consistent.
- Online schools need to be prepared to provide multiple layers of support and assistance to new students, specifically from in-person schools.

- It is recommended that teachers personalize their online courses by making videos and using detailed graphics to engage the student as much as possible.
- It is recommended that online schools provide orientation and training to assist students in understanding the behaviors that can lead to becoming successful online learners.
- It is recommended that online schools provide an experienced mentor to new students so they can connect with them as often as possible.
- It is recommended that online schools seek feedback from stakeholders on how to improve online schools.

Recommendations for further study

There are many recommendations for further study. Quantitatively, research must be conducted to discover the effectiveness of online learning versus in-person or hybrid learning. In addition, it would be interesting to see the quantitative differences in the various types of online schools by analyzing standardized test scores between the types of online schools. These slight differences could have multiple impacts on student learning and success. Also, there could be more research on how much social interaction students need while attending an online school since this study proposed that online students need consistent social interaction with others.

Secondly, as mentioned throughout the study, getting student, family, and teacher input through a qualitative study could benefit current online schools and local education agencies. For example, more research can be done to understand better the specific time management and self-discipline behaviors students utilize so schools can better support their students and families. This includes how they complete their online coursework, such as completing assignments for one class in one day or working in each class every day, like in an in-person school setting. Also,

strengths and weaknesses could be studied based on the types of online schools. This would allow students from various schools to share their thoughts and discuss why these online learning methods work or do not work for them. Even more, additional research on the ideas and perceptions of why students and families choose an online learning environment allows schools and districts to identify students who would fit specific types of learning.

Finally, this study focused on student success in online learning through student lenses. However, more value could be added by adding family and teacher conversations to look at specific behaviors successful students exhibit in an online setting. In addition, there needs to be additional research on the online teacher and what behaviors they must have to help students in an online learning environment. This was touched on throughout this study but needs to be covered in more depth. Also, more studies on teachers' instructional methods in an online setting could benefit other online schools and teachers. These recommendations for further research can potentially improve online learning and discover additional findings to help students and families be successful in this type of learning environment.

Summary

This study aimed to investigate successful students' behaviors and skills when they initially moved from an in-person to an online school. The school chosen for this study is in Northeast Tennessee but serves students statewide. It is an asynchronous school serving grades 6th-12th with an enrollment of around 250 students. The nine study participants were in grades 10th, 11th, 12th, and students who recently graduated from the school. It provided insight into certain student behaviors that allowed them to be successful in an online setting. In addition, it also gained students' perceptions of online learning and how it could be improved.

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Appendix A



Date: December 9, 2022

Principal Investigator: **Jeremy Humphrey**, Graduate Student, Milligan University

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

Project: *An investigation of students successfully transitioning from in-person to online schools in Tennessee.*

IRB Tracking Number: 2022-42

IRB Approval Number: Exp2212091246

Subject: **Final Approval**

On behalf of the Milligan University Institutional Review Board (IRB), we are writing to inform you that the above-mentioned study has been approved as expedited. This approval also indicates that you have fulfilled the IRB requirements for Milligan University.

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 university 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 University IRB Office within 24 hours of the data collection problem or complaint.

The Milligan University 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.

On behalf of the IRB Committee,

David D. Gibbons, Ph.D.

Chair, Institutional Review Board

Milligan University



Appendix B

Focus Group Interview Questions Guide

1. Why did you choose to move to online learning?
2. How did you prepare for your transition to online learning, if at all?
3. Describe any difficulties when you transitioned from in-person to online learning.
4. Describe your daily routine when you first became an online student.
5. How involved are/were your parents/family in your online learning?
6. What are the similarities and differences between online learning and learning in a brick-and-mortar school?
7. What did you learn about yourself as a student when transitioning to online learning?
8. What advice would you give others when coming from a brick-and-mortar school?
9. Give an example of something you did when learning in a brick-and-mortar school that you do not do in online learning.
10. How did the online teachers help or hinder your transition to online learning?
11. What could online schools do to support better students coming from in-person schools?
12. What is challenging about online learning? Why?

Appendix C

Consent to Participate in Research Letter

Greetings!

Are you interested in participating in a study for my dissertation? My study focuses on the traits and behaviors of online students. Specifically, I am looking at when students transition from an in-person to an online school. To participate, you will join a Zoom with 2-4 students and answer questions I present to the group. It will be more of a conversation than anything. The Zoom will be recorded and transcribed to find common thoughts and phrases among the participants. Sadly, you will not receive anything for doing this, but it will help me, my study, our school, and other online schools better prepare students when coming from an in-person school.

The most important thing is your safety and anonymity. Therefore, I will not share your name or personal information about you in my study, but I will share your thoughts and opinions about learning in an online setting. The recorded video will only be used for information and will not be released to anyone.

First, I need to have your permission to participate. The school district has allowed me to ask for participation, but I need the student's and parent's permission. There is a link to the permission form if you are willing to participate here. This Zoom meeting will happen after the Holiday break but soon after we start the second semester.

Secondly, if you are willing to participate, I will separate everyone into groups and find out when we can all join simultaneously. However, you can opt out at any point.

I hope you're willing to help. However, if not, nothing will be held against you.

If you have any questions or concerns, please do not hesitate to let me know. I look forward to hearing from you!

Have a great day,



--
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Appendix D

COMMON BEHAVIORS & SUPPORTS FOR SUCCESSFUL ONLINE LEARNING



CREATE A CONDUCTIVE LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

Students need to create a quiet space that is free of distractions and comfortable for them.



MAKE A SCHEDULE

Students need to create a personalized schedule that maps out all tasks and activities for the week.



INTERACT WITH OTHERS

Students need to have scheduled times to socialize and interact with their peers.



BUILD FOCUS & DETERMINATION

Students need to have the ability to focus on their learning and be determined to overcome obstacles or setbacks.

FAMILY ENAGEMENT

Families need to be involved when students learn online. This could consist of providing direct assistance when students need support or checking on their progress periodically. Overall, there needs to be mutual trust between students, families, and schools.



TEACHER IMPORTANCE

Online teachers need to personalize and design online courses where students are engaged in the material. In addition, there needs to be efficient communication between the student and the teacher with frequent check-ins and feedback given on assignments.



CLASS STRUCTURE

To increase the flexibility of online learning, schools need to structure their courses where they maximize the freedom it provides. This includes providing a weekly video outlining expectations and allowing students to see all assignments due for the week.

