ANALYSIS OF TRADITIONAL PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTION OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION AND THE IMPACT THEY HAVE ON PUBLIC HIGH SCHOOLS IN WESTERN PA

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The popularity of alternative educational options has created more transient students, and the challenge for educators is to communicate and support the needs of all children. The purpose of this study was to gather the perceptions of principals of traditional high schools about alternative education options and investigate the relationships and impact alternative schools have on public high schools. This study surveyed 20 principals in Western Pennsylvania and the researcher also conducted ten follow-up in-depth interviews with survey participants. The investigative themes of the survey and interview questions concerning alternative education were: utilization, value, alignment of efforts, and planning and communication with respect to these settings. The research questions are based on the literature review and are as follows:

1. What type of alternative education programs do traditional principals utilize?

2. To what degree do traditional principals value alternative education programs? Why? Why not?

3. How do traditional principals align their efforts with alternative programs in order to promote student success?

4. What are traditional principals' perspectives on improving the alternative education process in order to better support at-risk youth transitioning back into public high schools?

The goal was to identify key factors that traditional principals experienced through their practical familiarity with the alternative education process. Quantitative and qualitative data were collected to answer the four research questions. Principals described their practical experiences with alternative schooling and identified the supports necessary in order for educators to meet the unique needs of transient students. Data obtained through the participants' responses established that communication, social services, and a variety of organizational practices are necessary components for meeting the needs of students attending educational alternatives. The audiences of this particular study are administrators from traditional and alternative settings that are interested in the principal's voice and practical experiences related to the placement of students in alterative settings and the selected effects of these processes on public schools. The findings confirmed that policies and mandates such as No Child Left Behind, IDEA, AEDY regulations and McKinney-Vento Homelessness Act have limited high school principals' discretion as they attempt to support transient students with unique needs.

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PREFACE

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1.0   INTRODUCTION

1.1   INTRODUCTION

Public education is shifting towards alternative educational options to compete with emerging charter programs that are recruiting more and more students away from neighborhood schools. Alternative programs advertise magnet school concepts and characteristics that differ from the public school environment. As urban principals train their teachers and educate their students doing more with fewer resources, they are further burdened with many transient students. Students are leaving the public school sphere because of disciplinary consequences, truancy issues, or a search for a better education. Today's urban principal often struggles with failing test scores, and high levels of accountability. They also attempt both to align curricula with the Common Core standards, and to maintain the safety of their schools, all while simultaneously trying to meet the high standards of high stakes testing. These challenges are some of the examples of uncontrollable factors that urban principals are forced to contend with. More educational options away from the public school environment could result in an already growing transient population, and force public school districts to pay large tuition bills to nearby alternative schooling programs.

The need for educational alternatives to traditional schooling for students will continue to emerge because schools are too large, pupil/teacher ratios are too high, traditions are too

strong, and money is too short to institute change on a broader scale (Chalker & Brown, 1999). Due to many external factors, public urban schools continue to struggle academically, which invites the need for educational opportunities like charter schools. Alternative programs commonly have a negative stigma associated with them, as stakeholders too often make assumptions that all students in these programs are defiant or uncooperative. Students with multiple discipline infractions are often mandated to attend these more restrictive alternative programs, but many children choose to attend alternative means of education. Many nontraditional students attend programs in search of a more unconventional means of education by taking advantage of cyber schooling, or online learning. Both have become a popular means of alternative education. Students often enroll in more than one school within one school year. Transient students are one of the many challenges that public urban high schools face, as children move between the different programs with limited to no accountability.

Raywid (1994) suggests three types of alternative education programs. The three categories differ by goal and student population. Type 1 programs are "full-time, multi-year, voluntary education options for students of all kinds, including those requiring more individualization, those seeking an innovative or challenging curriculum, or dropouts wishing to earn their diplomas". Type 2 programs are shorter term involuntary program aimed at discipline, and Type 3 programs are short-term therapeutic programs that focus on the social and emotional problems that are barriers to academic learning (Kraemer & Ruzzi 2006). Alternative education programs come in many forms… brick and mortar cyber schools, exclusively online learning, and behavior modification programs. They have varying core purposes: remediation, enrichment, hybrid opportunities, and credit recovery. Each alternative initiative targets different learners based on meeting the needs and wants of their children. Alternative education programs

are generally established in two ways. A public school entity can operate its own version of an alternative education program with an established behavior modification program, and online learning. The other option is that a school district can exercise its right to outsource their alternative students and pay tuition to the private and charter schools.

Alternative education programs (defined broadly) are impacting high schools across the commonwealth in regard to high stakes testing and a sense of urgency for meeting the unique needs of its students. Cuts in public school funding and competition from alternative means of education are hindering public school focus on student achievement. Impoverished school districts are forced to establish cyber programs, behavior modification programs, and even hybrid models with fewer resources, in order to keep students in their schools. The transient population created by this competition has generated confusion with funding and student achievement. Questions related to whom these students belong to and who is responsible for reporting students' successes or failures often muddy the waters of communication. The challenge of aligning curricula to common core standards leaves some doubt as to whether or not alternative programs have matched the core curricula of their sending schools.

Public schools face many challenges such as funding, several layers of accountability, and transient children. Communication between the public school entity and alternative schooling is extremely limited due to such issues as time constraints. Public high schools in Western Pennsylvania are impacted as they attempt to align curricula, so that students have a seamless transition back to public high school. The enrollment goals for alternative institution vary based on funding, and whether or not they are internal or external programs. External cyber schools attempt to retain their students but have low retention rates due to a high population of transient students. Internal cyber schools must allow for children to move freely between the

brick and mortar school and online learning, so that they do not jeopardize losing the student to an external program. Internal behavior modification programs attempt to rehabilitate students with negative behaviors through counseling and a more restrictive environment. They strive to have students return as quickly as possible to regular education settings in order to stay compliant with state mandates that identify schools that have too many students in alternative programs. Transitional schedules for students moving between behavior modification programs and public schools do not exist. Students are moved back into public schools without time to adjust to the freedom and demands of a public high school. More often than not, students return with the same negative behaviors and consequently are moved between the programs multiple times throughout their educational experience. Ensuring that transient students stay motivated and engaged in school as they transition between programs throughout their high school experience is proving to be very difficult. Attempting to identify academic deficiencies and maintain accurate records of transient students pose an extreme challenge.

The state currently measures the success of public high schools via performances on three Keystone Exams in the areas of Algebra I, Biology, and English Literature. Also, the calculation of a school's dropout rate is publicized to its constituents as an unfair representation of a school's success. A student must graduate in four years or they are (currently) considered a dropout. A transient nontraditional student that transfers to another school is counted as a non-completer and dropout, regardless of whether they graduate from another school. For example, if a child moves from a public high school to an alternative program and then returns to the same school, that child is considered a dropout because he or she left the four-year cohort. The Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) currently calculates graduation rates by using a cohort of students that begin the 9th grade in any given high school and complete the 12th grade in the same

school within four years (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2011). If a child leaves the district or is retained, that child is no longer considered to be part of the cohort and categorized as a dropout. PDE does not follow any student to their new school to then attribute their graduation to their original school. Dropout rates are continuing to rise while high schools try to create their own alternative education programs to cut costs in this current budget shortfall. The challenge for a high school principal is to balance the needs of all children while creating an uninterrupted educational environment. Actively engaging students with culturally relevant material and activities in an environment where safety and security is emphasized proves crucial to the success of non-traditional students. Consistent routines and clear expectations provide a platform for a teacher to integrate a transient at-risk learner.

1.2   PURPOSE OF STUDY

This study is designed to access the traditional principals' perceptions of transient alternative education students and the impact they have on Western Pennsylvania public high schools. Transient students, challenging state mandates, and lack of communication with alternative education programs leave public schools struggling to educate transient at risk youth. Pennsylvania public high schools have a four-year window to graduate all children or they count as a dropout regardless if they receive a diploma. An example of a challenging mandate is the policy around compulsory school age which allows children to stay in school until the age of twenty-one despite their grade level and effort towards graduation. Unfortunately, when a student reaches the age of seventeen a school district cannot enforce attendance through any means, including citations. The McKinney- Vento Homelessness Act of 1987 convolutes the

educational process further for children living in a shelter as they must attend their home school. If a student is court adjudicated to a residential facility, that child must attend the school district that houses that facility. The multiple stages of the policy lack consistency and make it difficult for at-risk youth to transform their academic shortcomings. The challenge is to research and generate data that can be used to lobby for legislation to alter educational policies and enforce accountability in alternative education programs. School districts must make educational decisions with finances in mind as they continue to face diminishing budgets. Making decisions that are best for children can be convoluted due to political agendas and financial repercussions. For example, a struggling reader or student with special needs may be instructed by their home school to attend an internal cyber school, towards attainment of the necessary reading level to be a successful online learner. That student and their family can then choose to attend a cyber-charter program that may accept their application, due to the possibility of tuition from the home school district. On the surface, the special education services are provided by a charter cyber program, but the independent work involved could be too difficult.

For example, a local urban public high school of almost 1300 students that faces many challenges due to current policies, like federal, and/or state mandates. This school district, located in the Pittsburgh area, is unable to utilize alternative education programs properly to protect the safety and security of their staff and students from their own communities. This high school currently has 52 at-risk students, mostly court adjudicated or homeless children, from other communities in the Pittsburgh area, who are residing in a facility located within the school district. The facility in question is defined by law as a permanent residency. Children normally spend no more than three months in this facility before they are released to their families or guardians.

A failing high school is defined by Pennsylvania Department Education according to Keystone exam results. A failing academic facility such as this high school in question must educate the at-risk youth from this particular facility, because they are adjudicated by the juvenile court system. A challenged urban high school with court adjudicated students who must be enrolled into regular population cannot transition these students through an alternative education program, since their crimes are not necessarily school related. Only children that have been expelled during the current school year can attend an alternative education program. A possible restriction for a child that breaks the law in their community, is to temporarily reside in a residential facility and attend another high school. Alternative Education regulations defined by Pennsylvania Department of Education result in strict documentation and requirements that keep children out of the appropriate educational environments that would support public high schools and at-risk youth. Special education policy such as Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) allows children with emotional disturbances to be fully included in public schools. Resources brought to impoverished urban schools through grant monies are often allocated to assist with at-risk students.

Are nontraditional students having their needs met through alternative means of education? The impact of picking up the educational pieces of the nontraditional student returning to public school can prove to be unmanageable because of the limited accountability placed on external alternative programs. For example, charter schools advertise that they enroll all students but they fail to clarify what it means when a student loses their place for attendance, behavior, or grades and they must return to a public school. Academic achievement is one of many problems students face as they transition between alternative education and a public high school.

A high school curriculum is mapped to cover the "eligible content" necessary to prepare students for standardized testing as well as preparation for post-secondary opportunities. Many courses build off of previous skills and knowledge developed in prior lessons. The lapses in the curriculum in alternative programs may cause many problems for students. Generalizing high school courses and teaching generic versions due to staffing issues create significant setbacks for children in behavior modification programs. Academic struggles are evident as children are forced to draw from previous lessons that they may have not yet mastered, or were not exposed to due to their lack of success in the alternative setting. The public high school teacher must then differentiate instruction or provide remediation opportunities for a student they may only see forty-five minutes a day. The student must also be receiving the current classroom experiences in order to prepare them for high stakes testing. Therefore, in most cases a nontraditional student struggles in a regular classroom environment. Educators are left with the task of motivating them to complete the current material, and possibly relearning prior material. The everyday challenges for an urban educator are endless.

Academic achievement is also hindered by truancy and lack of consistent attendance. Truancy is an ongoing battle at many high schools, but compulsory school age does not promote the need for children to attend school. High schools have little or no leverage to force attendance after the age of seventeen, but all children are permitted to attend school until twenty-one years old to pursue their diploma.

Alternative programs often times do not take into consideration the credit count necessary for a student to move back into a public school, maintain their appropriate grade level, or possibly receive a diploma. Underclass online learners frequently return to high schools after falling behind in their course work and failing promotion to the next grade level. Many public

institutions in Pennsylvania have different graduation requirements that result in a variance of credit expectations from school to school. Alternative programs including online learning frequently put students at a disadvantage due to the students' nontraditional learning style and the challenge to complete the online tasks independently. Motivation becomes a huge factor as students make an overwhelming attempt at fulfilling graduation requirements that seemingly can result in higher dropout rates.

Positive stable personal relationships are necessary supports to motivate nontraditional learners. Transient students lack a consistent stable environment, which contributes to their struggle with perseverance in academic challenges. Urban public high schools will continue to educate all students in their communities, but they will continue to face challenges theoretically and financially. It is difficult to create an environment where all students can learn with fewer resources.

1.3 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What type of alternative education programs do traditional principals utilize?

2. How much do traditional principals value alternative education programs, and why?

3. How do traditional principals align their efforts with alternative programs in order to promote student success?

4. What are traditional principals' perspectives on improving the alternative education process in order to better support at-risk youth transitioning back into public high schools?

1.4   GENERAL PROCEDURES

An empirical stance of the literature will serve as an analysis of past alternative education practices and programming. A platform will be generated with an historical analysis and review of literature supporting effective practice in current alternative education scenarios as well as exploring practical data to define traditional principals' perspectives of alternative education programming. This study will investigate how alternative education programs impact urban public high schools in Western Pennsylvania through means of surveying 66 urban high school principals. These schools will be identified by a 30% (or higher) free and reduced lunch student population.

A mixed methods approach will allow surveying to collect the voices of local administrators regarding their successes and concerns around alternative education. Open-ended responses will provide opportunities for qualitative feedback that is crucial to the accuracy in addressing the questions generated by the research. Close-ended questions will provide a systematic process of calculating quantitative data from which to draw essential conclusions about the alternative education process. The data generated could potentially be used to influence public policy to better support children and public education.

1.5   STUDY LIMITATIONS

Not all urban public high schools are impacted in the same manner by the alternative education process. Some school districts have internal alternative programming such as cyber school, behavior modification, or credit recovery, used in an attempt to financially reallocate their

resources. Other schools exclusively outsource their students to private/charter programs due to staffing issues or only a minor need for alternative education. Financial inadequacies play a critical role in the education of all children. School districts are forced to make decisions around educating at-risk youth based on available monetary resources not always necessarily in the best interest of children.

Possible study limitations may be due to a school's unwillingness to share facts about their alternative schooling arrangement, which may be related to possible inconsistencies in record keeping. School districts can face possible sanctions or negative consequences from outside agencies, such as advocacy groups, or the Pennsylvania Department of Education if too many children are alternatively placed, or if the education is be deemed inadequate. Inaccuracies, or lack of attention to detail, can stem from school districts not having the resources necessary to track the essential data.

Another crucial limitation is the one sided perspective offered in this study. The focus of traditional principals' perspectives will offer analysis from the public high schools' point of view on alternative education. If a study were to be designed to pursue alternative education principals' perspective, then the results may vary dramatically.

1.6   DEFINITION OF TERMS

Alternative Education- "For the purpose of this section 'alternative education' means the modification of the school course of study and adoption of teaching methods, materials and techniques to provide educationally for those pupils in grades six through twelve who are unable to profit from the regular school course of study and environment" (Arizona Section 15-796).

Brick and Mortar Cyber School- A cyber program that is designated in a physical building where students report to logon to a computer to access the curriculum in the designated facility. Most programs have highly qualified teachers available in the facility to support the student learning process.

Behavior Modification Alternative Program- Aim to segregate, contain, and reform disruptive students who typically do not choose to attend and are placed in the program for short-term participation. High school curriculum is limited and/or students work on assignments provided by home schools. This program is highly structured and punitive.

Cyber Distance Learning- A cyber program designed to the meet the needs of children who cannot or are unwilling to attend school. Examples such as teen parents or non-traditional students that possibly struggle with truancy often elect this option of education.

Credit Recovery- This program can be offered strictly online or in a physical facility to provide students that opportunity to recover credits or classes they previously failed. Credit recovery assists with dropouts and students struggling to maintain grade level requirements. Educators often time see credit recovery as less reputable because the minimal hours required do not meet the instructional time of an average course.

Remediation- Programming used to re-teach skills that were not mastered. Remediating curriculum allows students to sustain graduation requirements through their ability to relearn material so that they have academic success.

Enrichment- Opportunities designed for all students to take a course outside of the school building due to scheduling restraints or lack of availability. Remediation programs allow for students to take unique or advanced course that may not be available at their current school.

Hybrid Schooling Programs- A student may attend a traditional high school as well as attend a cyber-school program to do credit recovery or take enrichment courses. Students can also attend a distance cyber program with the option of attending a physical building to get the help necessary to continue on with their online learning.

Traditional Principal- A traditional principal for this study is defined as a public school administrator, not a principal in an alternative setting.

2.0   SECOND CHAPTER: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

2.1   INTRODUCTION

As public education in Pennsylvania faces new levels of accountability with the implementation of the Keystone Exams, school districts must meet the needs of all students, regardless of the lack of resources. Alternative education could become necessary for some students. Children have many different levels of need, and some may benefit from a nontraditional teaching method or style. When educators, parents, and community members hear the term "alternative school", academic at-risk students who can be a general disruption to the educational environment comes to mind. Alternative programming has become more multi-faceted within the last decade, leading public schools towards attempts at replicating these concepts in order to educate all children. Cyber components and alternative brick and mortar programs are opportunities for the non-traditional learner. A level of competition has been created by alternative education opportunities, putting more pressure on public schools. Recent shortcomings due to a decrease in state and federal funding have put public schools at a financial disadvantage. Dropouts, at-risk youth, and transient children present the need for alternative programs. There are more than 230 active private alternative programs in Pennsylvania. The programs consist of charter schools, cyber schools, behavior modification programs, and diploma retrieval programs. Pennsylvania has 501 school districts, many of which are attempting to compete with the privatization of

alternative schooling, by establishing alternatives of their own (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2014).

Through the past few decades, some educators and policymakers have contended that if an alternate educational option is provided for at-risk students they will be able to succeed. Many authors have argued that alternatives are crucial to the traditional education system, but it is also essential that educators are meeting the needs of all students (Barr & Parrett, 2001; Natriello, McDill & Pallas, 1990; Raywid, 1989; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987; Wehlage, Rutter, Smith, Lesko & Fernadez, 1989; Young, 1990) (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Alternative opportunities such as remediation, enrichment, credit recovery, online learning, hybrid models, and other forms of alternative schooling, obligate public schools to develop and implement these programs to keep children within their school district. Many school districts in financial distress are attempting to attract students back into their school districts by offering alternative educational opportunities, for example:

- Enrichment curriculum and on-line course offerings to students that may not be currently available in the bricks in mortar school building.

- Remediation opportunities through a cyber-curriculum used to prepare students for state assessments, SAT exams, or credit recovery.

- Behavior modification programs are designed to service at-risk students that disrupt the educational environment or show signs of becoming a potential dropout.

- Teen parents and homebound students can be aided through a distance learning component.

All the above are examples of educational options, and the students that potentially fit into these scenarios supporting the existence of charter, cyber, parochial, and behavioral modification programs.

Many school reform efforts have emerged in the last decade, raising the level of accountability in an attempt to educate at-risk youth. Due to the complicated definitions and perspectives of alternative schools, it is important to analyze the literature to determine what has been most commonly researched and what theories continue to hold true throughout the many changes in education. School choice and competition have forced public schools to offer more options with fewer resources.

Through a comprehensive review of the literature, I hope to find the answers to the following questions:

Literature Review Questions

1. What are the major historical developments of alternative education since 1960?

2. What are considered best organizational practices and pragmatic approaches to the various alternative education programs?

3. What are the characteristics of the students who are choosing to attend or are being referred to alternative education programs?

This study will address the problems with the communication and the effectiveness of alternative education programs, and how they positively or negatively impact public high schools analyzed through a mixed methods approach.

2.2 HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

The major historical developments of the alternative education movement will be addressed with a general time line highlighting the significance of the literature within each decade. Also, the literature discusses the association of some crucial events in history, such as the civil rights movement, and how alternative education has emerged and evolved. Other factors like federal and state mandates have also influenced the transformation of alterative schooling. The literature will be presented in chronological order, accentuating the major happenings, starting in the 1960s until the present day of alternative education. The last section includes a modern day example and case study of one Pennsylvania school district and their challenges of meeting the needs of children from a residential facility within the district.

Public education is shifting towards alternative educational options in an effort to compete with emerging charter programs. Alternative programs advertise magnet school concepts and characteristics that are different from the public school environment. As traditional principals try to adequately train their teachers, provide enhanced educational opportunities to their students, and do more with fewer resources, they are burdened with many transient students. Disciplinary consequences, truancy issues, or a search for a better education are some of reasons why students leave the public school system. Today's urban principal often struggles with failing test scores, and high levels of accountability. They also attempt to align curricula to the common core standards, maintain the safety of their schools, while simultaneously trying to meet the high standards of high stakes testing. These challenges are some of the examples of factors that urban principals are forced to contend with. More educational options away from the public school environment could continue to feed an already transient population. Due to

Pennsylvania's policies on charter schools, public school districts are faced with student tuition bills that require payment to nearby alternative schooling programs.

The reputation and goals of alternative schooling has changed with the emergence of technology and student centered instruction. Also, consistent academic and behavioral struggles of urban schools may have opened the doors for new programs that are designed to target specific populations of nontraditional students. This epidemic has contributed to more transient at-risk youth who maybe exercising their right to try different educational options. The need for educational alternatives within the realm of traditional schooling will continue to emerge because some schools are too large, pupil/teacher ratios are too high, traditions are too strong, and money is too short to institute change on a broader scale (Chalker & Brown, 1999). Due to many external factors, public urban schools continue to struggle academically, which invites the need for educational opportunities like charter schools.

The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) initiated a survey in the fall of 2008 to more than 1800 school districts nationwide, in which they received a response rate of ninety-five percent. A follow up survey was done in 2009, which received a ninety-nine percent response. Carver & Lewis (2010) reported the significant statistics of the alternative schools administered within the school districts or through external providers. An analysis of five significant findings is listed in the matrix below.

Table 1. Alternative Schools and Programs Administered by the District or Other Entities

Source: Adapted from (Carver & Lewis, 2010) (NCES)

1. In the 2007–08 school year, 64% of districts reported having at least one alternative school or program for at-risk students that was administered either by the district or by another entity. Forty percent of districts reported having at least one district-administered alternative school or program, and 35 percent of districts reported using at least one alternative school or program administered by another entity in the 2007–08 school year.
2. There were 10,300 district-administered alternative schools and programs for at-risk students in the 2007–08 school year. Of these schools and programs, 37 percent were housed within a regular school.
3. Of districts that had students who attended district-administered alternative schools and programs for at-risk students, 17 percent used distance education as an instructional delivery mode.
4. Of districts that had students who attended alternative schools and programs for at-risk students administered by entities other than the district, 81 percent reported that some schools and programs were administered by a public entity such as a regional program, consortium, cooperative, or another school district; 26 percent reported that a private entity contracted by the district administered some alternative schools or programs; and 8 percent reported that a 2- or 4-year postsecondary institution in partnership with or contracted by the district administered some alternative schools and programs.
5. There were 646,500 students enrolled in public school districts attending alternative schools and programs for at-risk students in 2007–08, with 558,300 students attending district-administered alternative schools and programs and 87,200 students attending alternative schools and programs administered by another entity.

The data published by Carver & Lewis (2010) shows the significance of a growing need for educational alternatives. Many schools are managing to house their own alternatives, and many are forced to contract these services to private institutions. The need to support students, who are not successful in a traditional classroom environment due to negative behavior, truancy, social challenges, disabilities, or challenges in the community, is evident based on the statistics compiled from 1800 school districts discussed in this study. The historical significance of the alternative education movement has laid a foundation for the development of multiple educational alternatives to educate all children effectively.

Alternative programs commonly have a negative stigma associated with them, as stakeholders too often make assumptions that all the students in these programs are defiant or uncooperative. Students with multiple discipline infractions are often mandated to attend these more restrictive alternative programs, but many children choose to attend alternative means of education because they are unhappy with the local public school. Many nontraditional students attend programs in search for a more unconventional means of education by taking advantage of modern technology. Cyber schooling, or online learning has become a popular means of alternative education. Students have a right to move between the traditional and cyber programs, according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (2014), there were more than 150 cyber charter schools and over 10,000 students were attending cyber schools in PA during the 2011-2012 school year. Transient students were one of the many challenges that public urban high schools face as children move between the different programs with limited to no accountability.

1960s/ Outside Public Schools

Alternative education really began to evolve around the early 1960s. The development of alternative schools away from public school control began to emerge in the late 1960s. Philadelphia's 'Parkway' opened in 1969, as well as Wilson Open Campus School in Mankato, Minnesota opened in 1968. Two other schools that emerged in the 1960s were Murray Road in Massachusetts and Harlem Prep opening in 1967 (Raywid, 1981). These programs were not originally labeled as 'alternative schools' but instead options for students and their families, who challenged political views and institutionalized concepts. These schools were dubbed the "counterculture" and it was later labeled by Charles Reich as the "Consciousness III" (Raywid, 1981). In Charles Reich's book *The Greening of America,* he writes about the counterculture of

the 1960's in the third section of consciousness that focused on personal freedom and equalitarianism.

Timothy Young (1990) highlighted the alternative education movement sparked when the civil rights movement flourished, creating two important historical views. The first concept was to create alternatives to educate non-traditional learners away from public education, or to educate them internally within the public school system. Non-traditional learners do not thrive in traditional classroom settings with 'lecture style' instruction. The 'freedom school movement' was born, as programs were established outside of the public school to provide education to minorities who were poorly educated and misrepresented in public school systems (Barr, 1973). The freedom schools were developed in churches and in communities by groups attempting to support education for minority children.

The Free School Movement

The Free School Movement was the second option that evolved from local community control. It took education out of the public schools, in a countercultural effort to accommodate non-traditional children (Miller, 2002). *The Free School Movement* evolved around establishing schools based on the needs of the community, and shifted education towards self-fulfillment and individuality. These schools were designed to cater to students who were alienated and hindered by public schools. Children were encouraged to explore their curiosity, and foster natural abilities. Free schools were also established to eliminate boundaries and restrictions, with the philosophy that students will experience increased intellectual growth without adult limitations. There was no required learning and no set discipline or controls imposed on students (natural consequences were assumed to prevail).

In contrast to education based almost exclusively on academic excellence, Free Schools shunned formalized teaching. While academic achievement was important, it was generally seen as secondary to individual happiness and valuable only insofar as it helped one achieve the goal of self-fulfillment (Lange & Sletten, 2002, Pg. 4).

The Free school movement provided a student centered educational option that let students lead their own development. This natural progression permitted students to be flexible and gave them freedom from a traditional classroom setting. Seating arrangements and tradition instruction was altered to engage children in activities that allowed them to work at their own pace. Free schools partnered families and educators, who believed that learning should be natural and exciting. They believed learning should not be limited to instructional strategies, textbooks, curricula, or expectations for discipline (Miller, 2002).

The civil rights movement, and the attempts to evolve our culture spilled over into education in the 1960s. Dropout prevention programs began to form in the 1960s to support nontraditional learners. In the mid-1960s, President Lyndon Johnson launched his campaign on poverty, targeting schools with the *Elementary and Secondary Education* (Act of 1965). President Johnson focused his initiative on the public school system (Jeffrey, 1978). This effort was designed to offer equal education to minority and disadvantaged children. Due to civil rights efforts, more minority children in the 1960s began to have access to education, but much like today, public education differed in urban and suburban communities based on the disparity in resources. This policy has been renewed eight times and it has evolved in the *No Child Left Behind* initiative aimed at improving public schools. The concept of educating all children promotes a need for alternative education programs in order for school districts to meet the educational needs of all children (McKay, 1965).

Alternative schooling and the idea of Free schools challenged public schools to compete and progress in their curriculum and instructional delivery. The growth of the alternative movement was slow, but it paved the way for present day initiatives, leading public education into a new technology based education, changing the way instruction and assessment is delivered. The alternatives of the 1960s (outside of the public school system) helped eliminate the concept that the public schools were the one and only option. Alternatives helped support the desegregation of public institutions and force them to be more flexible. Alternatives within the public education model became more common, and over 500 "free schools" began to emerge nationwide in the late 1960s. Public education continued to experience crisis brought on by civil rights movement, encouraging public schools to desegregate. Public schools faced teacher strikes and student protests. This countercultural revolutionary concept of open classrooms and alternative means of public education challenged the public school system and core beliefs (Miller, 2002).

1960s/ Inside Public Schools

As alternatives evolve outside the public school system, internal programs were inspired to create competition and meet the needs of all children. "Open schools" were the first public school initiatives towards alternative education. The Open School movement was advertised as a student-centered approach with non-competitive assessments. They were designed to give parents, students, and teachers choices within a system that had been historically inflexible, and dependent on traditional classroom settings. The existence of the Open Schools in Minnesota, Massachusetts, and Oregon during late 1960s greatly influenced the creation of public alternatives on all levels of education, including the following (Young, 1990):

- Schools without Walls – emphasized community-based learning; individuals from within the community were brought in to teach students.

- Schools within a School – intended to make large high schools into smaller communities of belonging; individual groups were designed to meet educational needs and interests of students.

- Multicultural Schools – designed to integrate culture and ethnicity into the curriculum; some had a diverse student body and some catered to a specific ethnic group.

- Continuation Schools – used as an option for those who were failing in the regular school system because of issues such as dropout, pregnancy, and failing grades. These schools were less competitive and more individualized.

- Learning Centers – intended to meet particular student needs by including special resources, such as vocational education in the school setting.

- Fundamental Schools – emphasized a *back to basics* approach in reaction to the lack of academic rigor perceived in the Free Schools.

- Magnet Schools – developed in response to the need for racial integration offered a curriculum that emphasized themes meant to attract diverse groups of students from a range of racial and cultural backgrounds (Lange & Sletten 2002).

1970s

In the 1970s, the international Consortium on Options in Public Education under the leadership of Robert Barr, Daniel Burke, and Vernon Smith "became a major voice for alternatives and options systems" in the public sector (Raywid, 1981, p.552). The progressive alternative movement exploded due to public recognition of alternative education. Racial tension, concerns of overcrowded schools, and a decline of teachers and administrators due to state mandates could

now be addressed. Stewart (1993) estimated that 464 alternative programs existed in the United States in 1973. Alternative schools had grown from a few hundred programs in the 1970s to at least 10,000 schools in the early 1980s (Stewart, 1993).

The emergence of David Tyack's book *"The One Best System"* (1974) promoted the idea of school choice in American education. Tyack questioned the theory that there is one best way to manage school instruction, organization, teacher preparation, and curriculum. This publication helped the alternative school movement gain momentum, and by the mid to late 1970s a shift in education began. Early alternative schools were private and based on individualistic concepts, whereas a sense of community, group awareness, and responsibility began to be the focal point of alternative schools by the end of the decade (Raywid, 1981).

1980s

The 1980s continued in a traditional approach to education until the publication *A Nation at Risk* in 1983 highlighted the failures of curricula nationwide, and generated a sense of urgency in changing the direction of public education, and creating accountability (Ansary, 2007). Young (1990) notes that throughout the 1980s, alternative initiatives focused on disruptive and underperforming public school students. These programs decreased options like student-centered activities, and moved away from the open school concept. The new alternative schools shifted towards the teaching and learning process as teacher driven instruction. The students were the learners and the teachers delivered the instruction without much student feedback. Alternative schools of 1980s were relatively traditional and faced pressure from the public for accountability and a "Back to the Basics" movement that focused on keeping students in public schools (Marsh & Willis, 2003). The alternative programs of the 1980s focused on creating educational options

for at-risk youth and potential dropouts. The literature on alternative education focused exclusively on dropout prevention.

Into the 90s and beyond

"In 1990, the bipartisan *Commission of the Skills of the American Workforce* led by former Secretaries of the U.S. Department of Labor noted in its report, *America's Choice: High Skills or Low Wages!,* that the United States, unlike all the other countries that it competes with economically, does not have a system of education standards identifying what all students need to know and do to succeed in the 21st century economy" (Aron, 2006, Pg. 1). The focus on new skills, and the huge impact of the internet in the 1990s, forced local control and schools districts to reassess the way they educate children. An era of educational accountability began to take form with the implementation of No Child Left Behind and the call for a need for all schools to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP). Standardized testing became a vehicle for states to measure the success of their public schools. In an effort to build in more accountability, the Bush administration adopted *No Child Left Behind* in 2001, which forced school districts to become more accountable by enforcing high stakes testing. This new policy attempted to raise academic standards across the country. A system of state standards was implemented, and school curricula were aligned in order to reach national accountability within the high stakes testing model. This endeavor was designed to support schools with lower achievement, and give them a blueprint for reformation (Lawrence, 2006).

High school graduation rates reached an all-time high in 1969 at 77.1 percent, but rates have declined to 69.9 percent (Barton 2005 p.2) (Aron 2006). More than 30 percent of children in the United States are dropping out of school. These statistics support the need for an

alternative means of education in order to meet the needs of as many non-traditional learners as possible.

The accountability has also changed in recent years with the implementation of *No Child Left Behind* and Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) movement. PA Public high schools are now faced with the Keystone exams to generate the Adequate Yearly Progress (APY) measure. AYP measures the growth and success of public schools in the commonwealth. Pennsylvania's original plan was to gradually increase the proficiency requirement in reading and mathematics to 100 percent by the year 2014. This expectation of 100% proficiency was a challenging expectation. For all students, including children with disabilities the plan began to falter as overachieving, as well as underachieving schools, began to struggle. Even the most elite public schools in Pennsylvania have shown a recent lack of growth and stalled results on the PSSA exams. This concern has affected nearly all schools in the commonwealth, and has shifted the Pennsylvania Department of Education in the direction of the recently created Keystone exams, Standards Align System (SAS), and adopted the common core standards to assist schools with aligning the curricula of all their programs. The Common Core standards are a nationwide initiative to ensure high school graduates are prepared to enter a two or four post-secondary program or enter the workforce. The transition plan to the new high stakes testing is not complete at this time, but it is a serious topic for debate. Currently, the graduating class of 2017 is expected to show proficiency on the designated Keystone exams Algebra I, Biology, and English Literature. The new Keystone Exams have replaced the PSSA requirement for high school students. The accountability of high stakes testing remains at all levels for public schools but PSSA assesses grades three through eight.

2.3 ANECDOTAL OBSERVATIONS (ONE SCHOOL DISTRICT'S RECENT CHALLENGES)

The following observations are a series of practical examples that one Pennsylvania urban school district has experienced in recent years. Educating transient children in a group home setting creates some of the situational discussion that surfaced an earlier analysis of the literature. The implications and concessions generated from a lawsuit filed against this Pennsylvania school district affected how school law has been interpreted concerning the practice of moving students in and out alternative education settings. This outcome has changed the way a school district documents and manages their placement of all new students. Thousands of dollars in legal fees and many hours of compensatory education was the result of this lawsuit. The school district had to compensate their solicitor, and the students involved in the lawsuit were awarded hours of compensatory education paid for by the district.

This Western Pennsylvania High School that will be referred to as high school "A" currently faces a similar battle in a class action lawsuit with Kids' Voice and a "group home" with guidance from the Ed Law Center. Kids' Voice is a group of Pittsburgh attorneys that represent some children living in circumstances such as a "group home" facility, and they influence the decisions of community leaders and educators in school district The magnitude of this particular lawsuit has largely impacted education in this community. This "group home" has alleged that the courts adjudicated youth of their facility are being discriminated against due the structure of the transition process used to fully include a new "group home" resident. Educational records prove that the majority of these children have attended alternative education programs for most, if not their entire, education. Students that have never, or infrequently attended public schools tend to struggle in a large setting with the typical responsibilities of a

high school student. These concerns are rarely taken in to consideration by school law and alternative education policy.

Urban school district "A" has been mandated to fully include all "group home" residents into the public schools. "A" based on outdated alternative education regulations. The Education Law Center reported during the negotiation that it is illegal for the school district "A" to transition students into the district through the means of alternative education. (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013) Furthermore, all children regardless of charges, including sexual offenses, violent crimes, and other disruptive behaviors must be enrolled into the public high school within five days of their placement into "group home". No child is permitted to be placed in an alternative education program regardless of the crimes they have committed. A student may be placed in an alternative program if that student was expelled from the last school they attended for a weapons violation only.

School district "A" high school regularly houses approximately 50 children from the "group home" facility without the support needed to manage disruptive and uncooperative behavior, as well the means necessary to support their academic achievement. Some of school district "A" resources to educate the children of their community are exhausted on the court adjudicated children temporary placed at "group home" from other communities throughout the Pittsburgh area. Because the "group home" facility is considered a permanent address, the children must attend the school district "A". This does not hold true for at-risk facilities in other communities, which are considered shelters. Those students have the right to be bused back to their home school district. This class action lawsuit filed by Kids' Voice on behalf of "group home" has challenged an already impoverished school district, with many of its own needy

children. This ongoing dilemma is not recognized by the Pennsylvania Department of Education as public urban schools attempt to fulfill their expectations of high stakes testing.

This real life example of at-risk youth being moved between different facilities and schools, has led to inconsistencies for these transient students. This scenario has also forced a poor urban school districts and high schools to sacrifice their resources to educate troubled children from other communities. Urban school districts cannot afford these types of challenges without the option to utilize alternative education programs to exclude some of these disruptive youth.

In conclusion, the historical significance of the alternative education literature suggests that throughout each decade, many developments have prompted alternative education into a sizeable educational entity. Alternative education today seems to repeat history and mirror past shifts. Many of the same reasons students choose, or were sent to alternative programs in the 1960s and 1970s are some of the same reasons why charter schools, behavioral modification programs, and cyber schools are thriving today. Whether students are mandated to attend other schools, or they choose to explore a new educational option, all students cannot be educated in public urban school districts because of a lack of resources and effective staff hindering the school's ability to meet the unique needs of all children and effective educate them. Educational initiatives like NCLB and the 1980s publication *The Nation at Risk* sparked the curiosity of American families' stimulating the alternative education movement. The emergence of technology has also created a new education process called cyber schooling.

These popular educational alternatives are now being copied by public schools to offer their own programs in an effort to save tuition expenses and educate their children within the parameters of their school district. The alternative education model has shifted from student-

centered activities with students engaging education at their own pace, to creative instructional strategies that allow the instructor to facilitate, in order to prepare students for high stakes testing. Today's high stakes testing and accountability has changed not only alternative education, but public education. Cooperative learning and teacher attempts to actively engage students are some of the current trends of public education. Technology will continue to influence the educational process as more performance data is shared publicly, and higher expectations are forced on public school districts.

2.4   ORGANIZATIONAL PRACTICES AND PRAGMATIC APPROACHES

Best practices as defined in alternative education are similar to some of the successful strategies in typical public education. Ideal circumstances of best practices and practical approaches to operating an effective alternative education program will be presented in this section. The introduction of the circumstances that lead students to alternative programming will be shared, as well as an analysis of the literature promoting the design of some programs. The strengths and challenges of the different programs are dependent on the type of population that it is servicing. The following review of the literature will offer different organizational and structural approaches to alternative education and include recommendations from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. This section of the literature review will attempt to define the relationships between the types of alternative education programs, state recommendations for establishing alternative programs, and the actual strengths and barriers of alternative education practice.

Three Types of Alterative Programs

Raywid (1994) categorizes alternative programs into three types. These three types hold true in many current situations, with some changes over the past decade. The three categories differ by goal and student population. Type I programs are "full-time, multi-year, voluntary education options for students of all kinds, including those requiring more individualization, those seeking an innovative or challenging curriculum, or dropouts wishing to earn their diplomas" (Kraemer & Ruzzi pg. 5); Type II programs are shorter term involuntary program aimed at discipline; and Type III programs are short-term therapeutic programs that focus on the social and emotional problems that are barriers to academic learning (Kraemer & Ruzzi, 2006). Alternative education programs come in many forms; brick and mortar cyber schools, exclusively online learning, and behavior modification programs. They have varying core purposes: remediation, enrichment, hybrid opportunities, and credit recovery. Each alternative initiative targets different learners based on meeting the needs and wants of their children. Alternative education programs are generally established in two ways. A public school can operate its own version of an alternative education program, with an established behavior modification program and online learning. The other option is that a school district can exercise its right to outsource alternative students, and pay tuition to the private and charter schools (Burch, Donovan, & Steinberg 2006).

Historically alternative education programs evolved from behavior modification designed for at-risk youth, into schools with specialized curriculum and technology to compete with public schools. The question of how to educate and meet the needs of all children in a public school atmosphere is the basis for a debate that has persisted over one hundred years.

Raywid (1994) states,

> "despite the ambiguities and the emergence of multiple alternatives, two enduring consistencies have characterized alternative schools from the start: they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and, consequently have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization programs and environments" (pg. 26).

Type I alternatives are schools of choice, sometimes resembling magnet schools, based on themes with an emphasis on innovative programs or strategies to attract non- traditional students. Type II alternatives are "last chance" schools where students are sent as a last step before expulsion. These are not schools of choice, and their emphasis is typically on behavior modification or remediation. These programs are often mandated by public schools to house at-risk youth. Type III alternatives are designed with a remedial focus on academic and/or social emotional issues. Both non-traditional and at-risk youth may be targeted to utilize these resources (Raywid, 1998). The different types of programs offered by Raywid (1998) still hold true to comparisons to today's alternative school arrangements. The newest trend is the technology explosion that has many students pursuing their education in such programs as district serviced cyber schools, or charter online programs.

Present Day Comparisons of Alternative Programs

Type I programs are today's cyber programs and charter schools that are aimed at recruiting students by advertising a better educational experience. These programs are designed to adapt to at-risk youth and do not attempt to change a problem with students. Many cyber programs advertise that they tailor their curriculum to meet the needs of each individual student.

Present alternative schools are evolving into technology driven processes that totally remove the daily interaction of a brick and mortar campus. A non-traditional student can be mistaken for an at-risk student. A non-traditional high school student is not defined clearly in the literature. For the sake of this discussion, I will suggest that it is the student that has proven to be unsuccessful in a typical educational environment due to barriers like learning disabilities, social concerns, truancy, and/or negative behaviors. An at-risk student then, is a child that is in danger of dropping out of school and not earning a high school diploma. The meaning of the two terms can become diffuse at times, but programs are designed to cater to the different needs of the student. Many of these programs are chosen by non-traditional and at-risk students and their parents, but the mandated alternative programs (housing at-risk youth) remain much the same. Mandatory alternative programs can be described by Lange & Sletten (2002) as the following:

- Maintaining a small size (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Morley, 1991; Natriello et al., 1990; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Young, 1990)

- Emphasizing one-on-one interaction between teachers and students (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Tobin & Sprague, 1999);

- Creating a supportive environment (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Case, 1981; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Young, 1990);

- Allowing opportunities for student success relevant to the students' future (Arnove & Strout, 1980; Barr, 1981; Natriello et al., 1990)

- Allowing flexibility in structure and emphasis on student decision-making (Barr, 1981; Gold & Mann, 1984; Natriello et al., 1990)

Type II and III alternatives are schools geared towards behavior modification, and are traditionally the stereotypical perception of what true alternative school setting looks like. The

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educational program is focused on remediation, and often has a therapeutic component that can rehabilitate chronic offenders. This program aims at changing behavior with the goal of returning to a public school setting. Type II programs (for most students) are mandated as a result of expulsion, or last chance opportunity. Further research has shown that there could possibly be a fourth type added to this list that would offer students a second chance opportunity, which would include school choice and remediation (Heinrich, 2005). Some diploma retrieval programs, and schools designed for credit recovery will fit into this category. Diploma recovery programs can be partnerships with local school districts that allow drop-outs to receive their high school diploma if they fulfill the district's graduation requirements through a non-traditional pathway.

Figure 1 below illustrates the diverse needs of students, as well the large number of different educational alternatives for non-traditional learners. It shows how complicated the alternative education process can be with one student with multiple needs. One alternative program may struggle to educate a wide range of nontraditional students. Most programs design their instruction and support around a specific population in order to best meet their needs. Raywid (1994) suggests that alternative programs fall into one of these three categorizes but can be a mixture of all three. Programs may have components of different educational resources and curricula, but they tend to design their programs around a particular focus based around the needs of their students. The three types of programs suggested by Raywid (1994) are designed to educate nontraditional students that have a specific need such as distance learning, or behavior modification. Some alternative programs staff their schools to meet multiple needs, but most seem to maintain a focus or concentration.

Table 2. The Diversity of Alternative Education

AN OVERVIEW OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION

The Diversity of Alternative Education

The shaded area highlights the Department of Labor's targeted focus.

Target Population	Educational Needs	Educational Objectives	Other Services	Funding Streams
In high school, behind academically > 4th grade < 8th grade	▪ Standards-based remediation ▪ Special Education ▪ ELL	▪ Diploma	▪ College & Career Counseling	▪ IDEA ▪ Title I ▪ Striving Readers ▪ ADA ▪ Perkins
In high school, substantially behind academically < 4th grade	▪ Special Education ▪ ELL	▪ Diploma ▪ Alternative Diploma	▪ OJT	▪ Title I ▪ IDEA ▪ Voc Rehab ▪ ADA ▪ Perkins
In high school, not attending	▪ Dropout recovery ▪ Special Education	▪ Diploma ▪ GED	▪ Counseling ▪ Drug Rehab ▪ Day Care ▪ Shelter/Foster Home	▪ IDEA ▪ Title I ▪ ADA ▪ Perkins
Dropout between 16-18, risk factors vary	▪ Credit retrieval ▪ Small group learning ▪ Standards-based, alternative curriculum ▪ Work based learning ▪ Twilight school ▪ Special Education ▪ Adult Basic Education	▪ Diploma ▪ GED	▪ Counseling ▪ Drug Rehab ▪ Day Care ▪ Employment services ▪ Flexible hours ▪ Health care ▪ Case management ▪ Career counseling ▪ Work readiness training	▪ IDEA ▪ Private grants ▪ WIA ▪ TANF ▪ Other state, local funding ▪ AEFLA
Dropout and over age 18	▪ Credit retrieval ▪ Small group learning ▪ Standards-based, alternative curriculum ▪ Dual enrollment ▪ Modular credits ▪ On-line learning ▪ Work based learning ▪ Evening school ▪ Special Education ▪ Adult Basic Education	▪ Diploma ▪ GED	▪ Counseling ▪ Drug Rehab ▪ Day Care ▪ Employment services ▪ Flexible hours ▪ Health care ▪ Case management ▪ College & career counseling ▪ Work readiness training	▪ IDEA ▪ Private grants ▪ WIA ▪ TANF ▪ Other state, local funding ▪ AEFLA
Incarcerated	▪ Credit retrieval ▪ Small group learning ▪ Standards-based, alternative curriculum ▪ Work based learning	▪ Diploma ▪ GED	▪ Counseling ▪ Drug Rehab ▪ Career exploration & counseling ▪ Work readiness training	▪ Juvenile Justice ▪ Private Grants ▪ IDEA

Developed by Betsy Brown Ruzzi (2005), Washington, D.C.: National Center on Education and the Economy

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Each category defines the targeted population and how it matches up with the goals and resources for each alternative education program. Figure 1 above shows the multiple paths to

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alternatively educating students K-12. Meeting the educational needs of each student based on their unique circumstances can be a challenge for traditional public schools. Figure 1 also illustrates that the services and funding necessary to support nontraditional students comes from a wide range of resources (Ruzzi, 2005).

Recommended Components of Alternative Education Programs

The targeted population and variety of services vary, based on the educational and social needs of the student. The educational goals (for all students) remain consistent throughout alternative education programs. The goal is to generate as many graduates as possible so that they can exercise citizenship in their communities as voters, tax payers, homeowners, and are career oriented.

Kellmayer (1998) suggests six crucial components for planning an effective alternative education program within a public school district.

- First, a committee must be developed, and meet regularly for at least one year.

- Second, that committee must decide on what population of students it will serve because of their various needs.

- Third, the admission process must be established next to ensure the criterion exists to enroll students.

- Fourth, the school district must then evaluate their resources to determine if they can support the alternative education program financing, staffing, and all other necessary logistics.

- Fifth, this component relates directly to staffing. The district must ensure that the designated staff can function successfully in a highly stressful environment.

- Sixth, the curriculum for the program must be carefully designed to give the students of the alternative school the same education choices and services available to all children of the district (Kellmayer 1998).

The planning and preparation of the organizational components described by Kellmayer (1988) can be partnered with the pragmatic approaches of Lange & Sletten (2002) to meet the needs of non-traditional learners with various challenges in a traditional learning environment.

The Pennsylvania Department of Education (2014) strongly recommends that alternative education for disruptive youth (AEDY) programs adhere to nationally recognized "best practices". The following best practices are considered when PDE reviews funding and decides on the approval of the application.

- Full-day programs totaling at least 27.5 hours per week

- Student teacher ratios at or below 10:1

- Individual Program Plans for each student and flexible instruction

- Positive emphasis in behavior management

- Integration of a career preparation component within the academic curriculum

- Experiential learning opportunities

- Integration of evidence-based programs that support pro-social behavior

- Adult mentors in the program

- Parent and community involvement

- A formal comprehensive periodic review of each student's progress toward achieving individual goals established upon placement in the AEDY Program

Barr & Parrett (2001) estimates that there are over 20,000 alternative education programs in the United States. A study done by Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) that surveyed fifteen random

alternative education programs across the United States with resulting data that describe strengths and challenges of current alternative education programming. The intended academic goals of students, be they attainment of a GED, high school diploma, or even obtaining college credits are all examples of end results within the fifteen schools represented in the study.

The ages of students being educated in these programs range from 15-20 years old, and they are located across 10 different states. A few programs will accept students into their early twenties because of the nature of the vocational opportunities for youth adults, but the students in this study on average are much younger. Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) focused the study around many topics, such as, student demographics, curriculum, assessment, classroom environment, and academic goal. The findings of the fifteen surveys are described below in terms of strengths and challenges reported by the different programs.

Strengths

- *Small class sizes that have low teacher/student ratios*

All of the 15 alternative programs surveyed by Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) reported the need for a less restrictive learning environment, made up of supportive adults working towards relationship building, as well as individualized attention to academic progress

- *Individualized academic plans*

The creation of individualized academic plans (IAP) provides support to at-risk youth with unique education related challenges. Similarly, to a student with special needs that has an individual education plan, an IAP is focused on academic achievement. Non-traditional students can struggle without focus, or the proper guidance. Individualizing a student's education by building realistic goals and supporting student achievement with outside resources, (such as social services) can decrease their chances of dropping out of high school.

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- *Flexibility in scheduling*

Creating dual enrollment possibilities as well as partnerships with business and industry to allow students to earn money or participate in job training opportunities while moving towards their diploma. Students in alternative settings have historically been retained, or have fallen behind academically.

- *Academic counseling and support*

Educating children towards what is expected of them to graduate is a motivating factor in helping struggling learners. Children sometimes need customized academic opportunities that can be created through communication about current course credit count and updated transcripts. Retention can be a negative experience that can cause a student to drop out of high school, keeping students on pace to graduate is another important strength of the fifteen alternative programs analyzed by Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006).

- *Relevant curriculum & Competency-based programming*

Curricula development with some components of competency-based standards is a key strategy to keeping material relevant to at-risk youth. The surveyed staff from the fifteen programs reported that students are successful with hands-on activities that presented experiences tied to prior knowledge. Culturally relevant educational experiences with components of vocational training can build a capacity for work related skills and citizenship.

- *Performance-based assessment*

The programs surveyed reported using different ways of assessing students, such as project based learning and portfolios. Traditional classroom assessment strategies could prove to be ineffective in alternative settings, faced with challenging behaviors, as well as students working at different academic paces.

Table 3. Synthesis of Key Strengths Alternative Programs

Strengths	Summary
1. *Small class sizes that have low teacher/student ratios*	**The ratio between student/teacher is crucial due to the unique needs of non-traditional students. Also, safety is an aspect often overlooked because of financial constraints. Establishing a safe uninterrupted alternative learning environment for students is key to promoting academic success.**
2. *Individualized academic plans*	**IAPs are optimistic attempts at setting realistic goals and expectations for struggling learners, but due to lack of resources, truancy, and community related distractions non-traditional students can struggle to begin the initial stages of valuing their education. An IAP can support that process, but establishing that document and continuing to monitor and evaluate its goals can become a challenge.**
3. *Flexibility in scheduling*	**Creative scheduling is a cost efficient way to generate hands on activities and opportunities for non-traditional learners. The goal for most students in alternative settings is to return to the sending school. Due to high stakes testing, students must stay on track to graduate and maintain the pace of the curriculum that is likely established by the PA Common Core standards.**
4. *Academic counseling and support*	**Using academic counseling to reestablish hope for students in a new educational environment is an excellent way to set short term goals and communicate with students. At-risk youth can be discouraged to drop out of school through counseling if the expectations are clear and specific.**

The strengths reported by the programs surveyed describe nontraditional instructional strategies and assessments. Also, flexibility in areas such as scheduling can create more time for students to master concepts and improve areas of weakness. One area not introduced in this study is the need for accountability. Public schools must abide by the accountability expectations from the governing educational body that aligns to the common core standards and meeting the

requirements of high stakes testing. The strengths and weaknesses of the alternative programs used in this study do not mention accountability as a strength or challenge. This leads me to believe that the accountability issues have not yet fully filtered down to alternative education.

Some of the challenges reported by this nationwide survey seem to be consistent with lack of communication with sending schools and professional development opportunities. Improved communication with sending schools could allow for reliable development of curriculum and programming.

Challenges

- *Duration of programs and credential attainment*

Students that have fallen behind academically due to personal tragedy, truancy, developmental concerns, etc., continue to struggle in the accelerated alternative program. The goals of most accelerated diploma retrieval programs surveyed by Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) are unrealistic and students lose motivation to reach milestones. Staff surveyed recommends that students be given the opportunity to catch up to their classmates, to maintain momentum, and attain their high school diploma or equivalent GED with reasonable expectations.

- *Creating pathways among programs*

The programs surveyed reported that connecting students to continue education opportunities will allow them to attain credentials or skills in order to achieve adulthood. Most students are leaving alternative education programs without the necessary preparation to be productive citizens. Only about half of students who earn a diploma leave high school prepared to succeed in college, career, and life (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Fox, & McNaught 2008).

- *Inconsistent data collection and little focus on long-term data*

Data collection is extremely challenging due to staff limitations and lack of resources, and is often fulfilled only to satisfy grant guidelines, or for funding purposes and not necessarily used towards instruction. Also, the value of data collection as it pertains to high stakes testing and curriculum development is a necessary process with new levels of accountability. The Pennsylvania Department of Education mandates that failing schools must complete "Getting Results Plans" of continuous improvement.

- *Need to validate the GED*

Survey results show that the GED is not a popular option for older students, or younger children who are extremely behind in their coursework. The GED is not traditionally seen as a positive education outcome. As school districts are made more accountable for graduation rates, many will discourage students from the GED pathway because it will hurt their reporting. "For dropouts, a GED is better than nothing, but for today's students and for our communities, staying in school is the best choice by far." (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Fox, & McNaught , 2008, Pg. 19) Research has suggested that GED holders do no better in the workplace than high school dropouts (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Fox, & McNaught, 2008).

- *Lack of effective and efficient curriculum, training, and diagnostic tools to build literacy and numeracy skills of older students who are far behind*

The need for better diagnostic tools in the areas of Mathematics and English was an area of concern for the programs surveyed in the study. Limited resources and funding has contributed to the lack of professional development to enhance the teachers' skills in these alternative programs. Literacy is a component of the new Common Core standards and struggling readers may never catch up (Heller & Greenleaf, 2007).

- *Lack of connections among programs*

Communication between sending schools and alternative programs, as well as the lack of communication between the differing alternative entities establishes a myriad of challenges transient student support. Efficient communication could assist administrators in sharing best practices and educational goals.

- *Difficulty attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers*

Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) reported that teacher compensation in alternative programs is inequitable, much lower in comparison to the public school system. This disparity is a leading factor in staff turnover rates. Alternative schools often educate students of different levels and ages within the same classroom, forcing teachers to dramatically differentiate instruction and use very creative instructional strategies to engage children. Few multiple tiered instructional strategies meet the needs of struggling learners, therefore; students are often left to work independently.

Table 4. Synthesis of Key Challenges within Alternative Programs

Challenges	Summary
1. *Duration of programs and credential attainment/ validation of GED*	**Building on Raywid's three types of alternative programs, the birth of a fourth type comes from the need to educate recent drop-outs or students who are desperately lacking credits. Educational alternatives have to somehow reflect the rigor of the sending schools in order for there to be willingness for them to award a diploma for completing the graduation requirements. The GED's lack of popularity and rising expectations could discourage at-risk youth from completing any level of formal education.**
2. *Lack of effective and efficient curriculum, training, and diagnostic tools to build literacy and numeracy skills of older students who are far behind*	**The new Common Core standards have components of literacy built into each discipline. The emphasis on literacy and the need for curricula that is vertically and horizontally aligned creates problems for schools with financial limitations. The new teacher and principal evaluation processes also has established accountability through high stakes testing. Quality professional development for educators is a key component that many alternative programs need to implement as effectively as public schools that often times have more resources. Educators need to make data driven decisions that depend on the use of reliable data that the PDE's classroom diagnostic tool can generate if designed correctly.**
3. *Lack of connections among programs*	**Limited communication and cooperation among alternative schools because of potential competing interests isolates programs to making decisions independently. Also, sending schools and educational alternatives should be consistently communicating about transient students to determine the student's best interests. In the case of a student with exceptionalities, an IEP meeting helps address this challenge.**
4. *Difficulty attracting and retaining highly qualified teachers*	**Students that attend alternative programs have unique needs, which the average teacher may struggle to support. The public school system has unionized work environment, state pension opportunities, and quality medical benefits. The turnover in these programs can be attributed to public schools hiring teachers who have these quality experiences engaging non-traditional students in alternative schools.**

The data collected in the Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) study examines some general academic strengths and challenges of select alternative education programs in the United States. The strengths can be categorized as relationship building and relevance. Both concepts are essential in settings that contain at-risk youth. Flexibility in programming and instruction are two other findings that have become more important to the success of all students due to the accessibility to the internet, whereas, traditional direct instruction struggles to actively engage students in all educational settings.

Challenges of alternative programs are staffing and professional development. Alternative schools are often times unfair targets of criticism due to negative student behavior, transient staff, and inconsistency in curricular programming. Curricular inconsistencies exist because cyber, charter, and behavior modification programs cannot or (in some cases) are unwilling to adopt the home school's curriculum because they have more than one sending school or they feel that their own programming is more effective. Because of the high level of transient students, transparency is important to successfully transition students between the different educational options.

In conclusion, the relationships between the types of alternative education programs established by Raywid (1994), recommend for establishing alternative programs, and the strengths and barriers of alternative programs set a foundation for establishing ideal alternative education. The organizational and structural practices illustrated in the literature show more similarities to many urban schools with struggling students. Meeting the needs of underachieving students living in challenging communities is a difficult task whether it's a charter school that is providing educational alternatives, or a public school district trying to close the achievement gap. Although many students attend alternative schools, many uncontrollable factors, such as

exceptions, or lack of district resources leave them to navigate through a traditional public school system. The literature has identified the various goals of alternative programs, and the contributing factors to the strengths and weaknesses of the programs analyzed.

The highly recommended practices that the Pennsylvania Department of Education offered are directly related to the alternative education mandates and policies that will be discussed in the next section. The analysis of the literature in this section defines the best practices when establishing an alternative school, as well as the best daily organization of the teaching and learning process of at-risk youth.

2.5   CHARACTERISTICS OF STUDENTS WHO NEED EDUCATIONAL ALTERNATIVES

Urban public schools have an array of nontraditional learners that could benefit from an alternative setting. This section will discuss the characteristics and challenges that many at risk youth experience as they navigate towards a high school diploma. The review of the literature will include student characteristics and current issues with alternative programs, as well as state mandates, policies, and initiatives to be explored, emphasizing how students are referred to alternative programs along with the limited discretion that educators have on making those decisions. The last section will include the introduction of the "Dichotomy of At-risk Teens" that will focus on the characteristics and choices of urban teenagers.

Without an alternative means of education, many nontraditional learners can become discouraged. This can result in high dropout rates among teenagers struggling towards adulthood. Accountability, limited resources, and strict mandated policies have led public schools towards

looking for effective ways to educate all children. The analysis of the literature on these topics will help guide the discussion towards characteristics of a nontraditional learner. A student can be mandated to attend one of these programs as result of an expulsion, or a family can possibly choose to send their child to an alternative education program in order to benefit from the flexibility of program such as online learning.

Philipsen (2007) describes the disparity of educational resources in schools located in poverty stricken communities. Struggling schools have a large minority population but do not possess the resources necessary to address deficiencies in student achievement. Many children are not developing adequate life skills required to be productive citizens in their communities because of the emphasis on standardized testing and the lack of support for Career and Technology Centers (Reynolds, 2004). Young adults are entering our community with limited life skills and are unprepared to exercise citizenship.

Nontraditional students often share characteristics such as: not performing on grade level, teen parenting, or a need to seek employment. These issues combined with limited academic skills can create at-risk youth that struggle to contribute to their communities after they leave school. The matrix below indicates connections between important student characteristics of nontraditional students, and traditional educational programing flaws that are often addressed by alternative education. Children that have nontraditional student characteristics can struggle because their barriers to achievement cannot always be addressed effectively in a traditional learning environment.

Table 5. Academic Program Design Issues by Student Characteristics

Source: Adapted from Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006)

Student Characteristics	Academic Program Design Issues
Age	• **Age limits on state funding for high school diploma programs** • **Motivation issues for older students who may not want to stay in school for 3+ years**
Grade Level Completed	• **Need to provide options for older students who have very few high school credits** • **Need to provide easy ways for students missing only a few credits to complete them**
Academic Level Achieved	• **Need to provide 'catch-up' curriculum for students who are far behind academically** • **Need to provide 'competency-based' curriculum for students at a high school level without high school credits**
English as a Second Language	• **Need to provide English mastery classes** • **Need to provide content classes in foreign languages** • **How to transition to academic or vocational classes in English**
Life Situation (employed, parent, social or health issues)	• **Need to accommodate work or parenting schedule or need for break in education program to address pressing personal issues** • **Need to provide access to childcare and other social or health services**

The adaption of Ruzzi and Kraemer (2006) Table 1 shows established student characteristics and the accompanying traditional academic programming design issues. The necessity for academic programs to meet the needs of all children is highlighted in this table. They are based on the

several categories that are very often not taken in consideration by decision makers (for example policy makers and local politicians). Later in this discussion, I will explore Pennsylvania's strict alternative education policy, which limits a school leader's ability to refer a student to a necessary alternative program. If the educational leader is able to determine that a student meets one or more characteristics of Table 1 they must be within PDE's recommendations to refer a student, because all children have a right to free and appropriate education until the age of 21. Fairly frequently, families do not agree with that decision or do not support moving a student to alternative program.

Pennsylvania's Alternative Education Policy

Alternative education for disruptive youth programs (AEDY) has multiple parameters for enrolling students. Eligible students who can be transferred to AEDY programs have to be defined as one of the following according to Pennsylvania Department of Education Purdon's statutes: 1) disregard for school authority, including persistent violation of school policy and rules, 2) display or use of controlled substances on school property or during school activities, 3) violent or threatening behavior on school property or during school affiliated activities; 4) possession of a weapon on school property, 5) committing a criminal act on school property, or during school-affiliated activities, 6) misconduct that would merit suspension or expulsion under school policy, and 7) habitual truancy.

AEDY programs must educate regular and special education students 990 hours per year. (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013) All students have a right to due process in way of an informal hearing to analyze relevant information pertaining to the recommended placement into alternative education program. Parents or guardians must be notified in writing with reasons for transferring student to an alternative education program. Students have the right to speak and

produce witnesses on their behalf, as well as question any witnesses at the hearing. If a student displays behavior that is an immediate threat to other students or the academic process, they may be placed immediately. The informal hearing can follow.

Students that are formerly adjudicated delinquents, or convicted of a crime may not be automatically placed into an AEDY program. Each situation has to be handled on a case-by-case basis. Adjudicated delinquents have a right to an informal hearing to determine if they meet the definition of disruptive youth. First, the school must consider if the incident that forced the adjudication was in school or at a school related activity. Also, the child's behavior in placement as well as any other adult recommendations (such as a juvenile probation officer) must be taken into consideration. PA department of education encourages public school districts to take all students coming out of placement, because many of them make significant progress, and therefore they should be allotted the opportunity to attend a public school.

All special education students attending AEDY programs must have access to free and appropriate public education (F.A.P.E.). The sending school or the alternative placement is responsible to ensure that special education services and the child's Individual Education Plan (IEP) is fully implemented and that the progress that is being made towards the goals of the plan are available to the student. All AEDY program must also comply with all state and federal regulations including the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). The true challenge for the public school entity is to provide an available resource that continuously checks on the progress and programming of accepting schools. All AEDY programs must be in session five days a week, 180 days per year, and a minimum of 810 hours per year.

McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act

Another contributing factor to the alternative education process is the surprising phenomena of homelessness. The Pennsylvania Department of Education defines "education for homeless youth" as individuals who lack fixed, regular, and adequate nighttime residence. Most urban public schools have homeless children that require special transportation and educational consideration. The McKinney-Vento Act of 1987 states that all state educational agencies must provide homeless youth within their organization access to the same free appropriate public education as all children within the educational institution. Children living in a shelter within the boundaries of a public school district have the right to attend the public school district in which the shelter facility is located. If a student becomes temporarily homeless and they are staying outside of the school boundaries, the school district is responsible for providing transportation if it currently offers busing to their students until permanent residence is established. This policy established by Congress can put a financial strain and create costs on school districts that are forced to provide these accommodations.

Urban public school districts are facing tremendous cuts in state funding, and a shortage of financial resources. Homeless students can often times be faced with multiple challenges because of transitions and inconsistency. Underprivileged youth risk facing poor achievement and developing into students that are at-risk of becoming high school dropouts. It is likely that an urban public high school has limited resources due to the financial constraints. Staffing, programs, facilities, supplies, etc. are needed to support children that qualify under the homelessness act, as well as the at-risk youth residing in the community.

Project 720

Project 720 was an educational initiative introduced in Pennsylvania to support No Child Left Behind. The terms rigor, relevance, and relationships were imbedded into the initiative to encourage unmotivated and underachieving students with sometimes undesirable behavior. In order for a high school reform project like 720 to begin to show results, educators must add rigor to the curriculum, make high school relevant, and build relationships with students (Grant, 2006).

The idea of a freshman academy was one of many pieces of this high school reform project that aided freshman students in the transition to high school. Project 720 was designed to surround students with caring adults in a middle school style atmosphere. At-risk students surface in the 9th grade because of the freedom of the high school environment, and their lack of accountability in reaching milestones towards graduation. Frequently, at-risk students are promoted to 9th grade from middle school in unorthodox ways. Some examples of this are social promotion, and unjustified Individual Education Plan requests. Those types of requests, or the idea of social promotion can leave a student with inadequate mastery of key concepts leading them to struggle in the high school environment. Special education services and other resources are often inadequate due to funding. Academic and social challenges can push at risk youth towards truancy and other behavioral issues, resulting in nontraditional students falling behind. This issue can result in more struggling students and failing high schools. High school students must complete a required number of credits to graduate, which often becomes challenging if a student gets behind in the minimum requirement.

If public school principals can ultimately improve the overall educational process for all students, then that must be the focus. Whether a student attends a public school or any type of

alternative program, the educators need to work together to establish a comprehensive systematic approach for educating all the children of any given school district. Competing interests, and lack of funding may stand between the communication and cooperation of educational institutions, but above all, educators need to do what is best for all children.

The educator's challenge is to motivate and prepare non-traditional children to perform positively on standardized tests, and at the same time give them a set of skills that productive adults need. Motivating children sounds easy, but what preparation is adequate enough for educators to help these underachieving at-risk students? Secondary educators who are responsible for grades 9-12 have the task of educating underachieving, at-risk teenage students. Statistics show dropout rates are the highest for struggling teenagers in the ninth grade. The high dropout rates sparked the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) to implement several statewide initiatives such as Project 720, named for the number of school days in a four-year high school career.
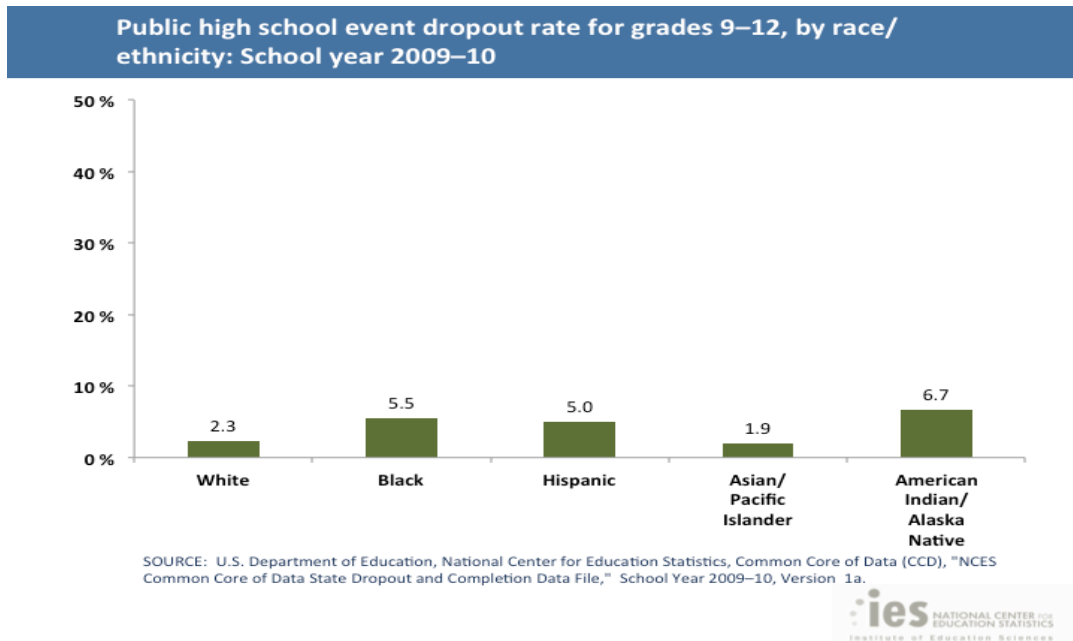
Figure 1. Dropout Rates

Figure 1 illustrates a common problem in urban public high schools. Teenagers that can benefit from an alternative education experience should be made aware of the options. Without options or the awareness of educational alternatives, at risk students my ultimately "fall between the cracks" and add to the already large number of high school dropouts.

Introduction of the Dichotomy

Payne (2005) uses the terms "street" and "structure" to describe the two (often) difficult roles that at-risk teenagers must balance. This portion of Payne's model focuses on ideas and concepts that I use regularly in a model that I created in my role as an urban high school principal to explain to students their roles and responsibilities while attending school. I designed a model merely by accident when attempting to explain to a student how his attitude and behavior needs to change once he enters the school building. This dichotomy model represents the two roles that at-risk teens must play to successfully grow into productive adult citizens (tax payer, home

owner, voter, etc.) in our community. The dichotomy is a visual aide that illustrates critical decisions that are being made by teenagers daily.

Street behavior often alienates young adults from societal cultural norms, and forces them to survive by any means necessary. Street behavior and negative choices often lead young adults into criminal behavior, forcing school administrators to alternatively place them, in order to maintain a quality educational environment within the school.

A struggling teenager must balance structured and street behavior in order to create an opportunity for self-reliance during their adulthood. A young adult's challenge to balance decision-making in order to achieve the "American Dream" is represented through this blueprint of efficiency in the diagram "The Dichotomy of At-risk Teens", as seen below. The dichotomy model is a simplified approach that I designed to help many students indicate signs of improvement in schools and in their community. This diagram was designed and utilized over a several year period to help me describe to families and students the challenging roles of an urban teen. It was used primarily when I administered to students in my role as a dean of discipline, and later principal. The progress of underachieving at-risk students can be relatively slow and difficult to measure, but the important aspect is to help each struggling teenager to improve their decision making process each day by taking steps forward. Payne (2005) describes a school's greatest resource as 'role modeling' provided by teachers, administrators, and staff. Also, access to alternative settings will allow for challenging students to make larger steps forward without disrupting the educational environment of others. Due to recent school violence, some students with the lack of discipline may need a more restrictive environment in order for a district to maintain the safety and security of their school.
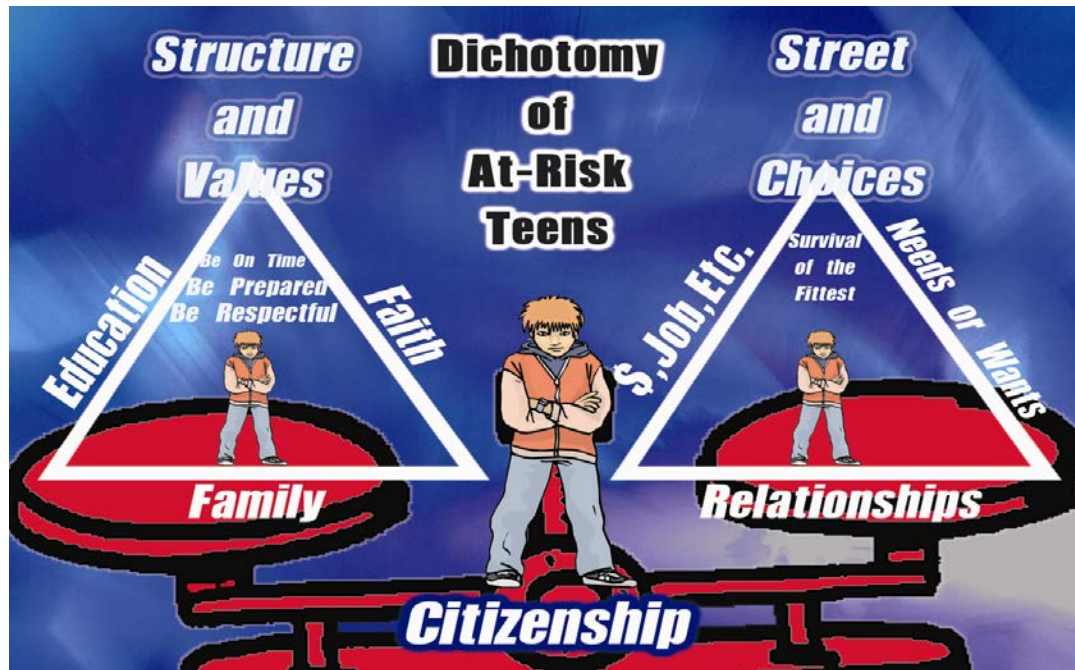
Figure 2. Dichotomy of At-Risk Teenagers

Critics posit a different view of poverty, one that looks for positives within the challenges. Some critics of Ruby Payne's work on poverty offers suggestions in the use of creative instructional strategies and student engagement as a key to success for impoverished urban children. "Culturally responsive teaching is a mindset and way of being in the classroom, rather than a list of techniques and strategies"(Sato & Lensmire, 2009, Pg. 268). Critics of Payne's work also suggest that she has ignored research that impoverished schools often do not have adequate resources, and that can include facilities, materials, highly qualified teachers, and staff turnover (Gorski, 2008). The poverty paradigm referenced in Payne's work has been largely criticized because of the references made to stereotypical behavior by economically disadvantaged people in order to explain the foundation of her work on poverty. Oscar Lewis is credited with originating the work on poverty in his (1960, 1961, 1963, 1968) publications focused on Mexican and Puerto Rican communities. Lewis's research established the culture of poverty paradigm and he attempted to highlight the positive aspects of the economically

disadvantaged cultures. Several critics of Payne's' work have shown evidence and multiple examples of instances where stereotypical behaviors are referenced. Payne's work seems to overwhelmingly lack any positive aspects of impoverished peoples and their communities (Bohn & Gorski 2007, Gorski 2007, & Sato and Lensmire 2009).

Ruby Payne's framework for understanding poverty has many constructive features that establish simple ways for educators to relate to underprivileged children and improve student achievement through the use of relationships. The "Dichotomy of At-Risk Teens" uses the "street" and "structure" concepts established by Payne, to show the importance of values and choices, and how they relate to creating productive citizens in urban communities.

Three core "values" represented in the dichotomy are adapted from Payne (2005) and they are associated with formal education, faith or religion, and family values. Those structured values need to balance the scales, in order for teenagers to mature and achieve "citizenship". The 3 B's (Be on time, Be Prepared, Be respectful) should be emphasized in the structured setting in order to successfully build the necessary values. The three core choices at risk youth face in the street environment are related to:

1. Getting their immediate needs met

2. Making money in some capacity

3. Forming positive and negative relationships.

Often teenagers form the wrong types of relationships because of absences in their lives, or failing to get their immediate needs met. Also, teenagers must choose how they will make money when some live in extreme poverty. 'Survival of the fittest' is a phrase I used to represent the street portion of the diagram.

At-risk youth often struggle with their choices on the streets, which can lead them to underdeveloped values. Truancy and defiant behavior can develop in school, and create the need for school officials to utilize an alternative education setting. Also, nontraditional high school students struggling in academic settings, could benefit from some portion of alternative education programming. Alternative education programs are not always used as a mandate for nontraditional students, instead it can be another option for at-risk youth to get closer to earning their diploma.

Conclusion

In closing, communication and consistency between sending and receiving schools are key components when educating transient at-risk youth. As many students transition in and out of urban high school schools, principals must plan how to merge their grades, curriculum, behavioral expectations, and yet continue to raise the bar for student achievement of their entire student body. Students that transition back into public schools after failing in cyber schools must enter a course, like mathematics for example, out of sequence, and then have to prepare for high stakes exams. Also, often times a student's attendance is a determining factor for why the cyber option was attempted in the first place. Many urban high school principals have to bridge all the gaps in order to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) with several students that have attended other schools throughout their public education experience.

Teenagers that possess the characteristics of struggling students, as well as some with daily life challenges, may benefit from a nontraditional educational setting. Alternative education programs can assist public schools with educating some of their nontraditional students through transparency and communication. Students that are good candidates for alternative programs often exhibit one or multiple of the following characteristics: chronic truancy, consistent

negative behavior, academic failure, transiency, community and family challenges, social concerns, and disabilities. The possibility that a family may choose to explore educational alternatives because of concerns with the public school option is also a factor. Whether children are mandated, or chose to attend an educational alternative, meeting the needs of all students with a variety of challenges and differences is a priority.

State mandated school improvement initiatives, and public school policies and regulations dictate to school districts the requirements for utilizing alternative education programs. Age, student achievement, and social concerns are the primary barriers that lead a struggling teenager to becoming an at-risk dropout. Also, a nontraditional student has many decisions to make outside of the school environment in order to make strides academically. Poverty and homelessness can also be contributing factors for why a student may choose to utilize online learning. Alternative educational opportunities are helpful for students that may need the daylight hours to seek employment. Alternative education programs provide a service for nontraditional students that will attempt to support their needs and help them avoid become a high school graduate.

## 3.0	THIRD CHAPTER: METHODOLOGY

## 3.1	STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

The researcher will attempt to connect the themes explored in the literature review with the designated sections in the survey instrument, as well as, interview questions. Also, this chapter will describe quality survey and interview practices and attempt to justify the necessary sampling used to complete this study. A simple descriptive approach was utilized in this study highlighting single administration "survey for the purpose of describing the characteristics of a sample at one point in time" (Mertens, 2010). Follow up interviews were done based on the data collected from the survey.

The purpose of this study was to access the traditional principals' perception of transient alternative education students and the impact it has on Western Pennsylvania public high schools. This study addresses the problem of the communication and effectiveness of alternative education programs, and how they positively or negatively impact public high schools. The data was collected and analyzed using a survey and follow-up interviews. This chapter details the general procedures that the researcher utilized, including the research population and purposeful sample, survey instrument, data collection, and data analysis procedures.

3.2 RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. What type of alternative education programs do traditional principals utilize?

2. To what degree do traditional principals value alternative education programs? Why? Why not?

3. How do traditional principals align their efforts with alternative programs in order to promote student success?

4. What are traditional principals' perspectives on improving the alternative education process in order to better support at-risk youth transitioning back into public high schools?

3.3 GENERAL PROCEDURES

This study investigates how alternative education programs impact urban public high schools in Western Pennsylvania through surveying 66 urban high school principals. Principals are likely chief decision makers in most public high schools, managing accountability, graduation rate, truancy, and student achievement. The multiple responsibilities traditional principals manage give them a vested interest in issues of alternative education. High school principals manage the day-to-day successes and failures of their schools, gaining many unique experiences, qualifying them as participants in this study. These principals were identified and associated by their school district's free and reduced lunch student population of 30% (or higher). Close-ended survey questions were provided a systematic process of calculating quantitative data from which to draw essential conclusions about the alternative education process. Open-ended interview responses

were provided opportunities for qualitative feedback that is crucial to the accuracy of addressing the questions generated by the research.

A small group of principals were asked to participate in a short follow-up interview based on the answers that they provided in the survey, as well as, their willingness to participate. At least five to ten principals were targeted to participate in the interviews. The researcher completed the follow-up interviews via phone and gather the data based on their responses.

Survey methodology allows a researcher to gather data efficiently from large populations of subjects. Surveys relied on respondents' reports of knowledge, and attitudes and behaviors. The validity and reliability of survey data depends solely on the respondent's honesty (Mertens, 2010). Eyewitness statements or personal experiences can affect survey data because some respondents may not know the honest answer. Mertens (2010) describes best practices of surveys based on data collected by the American Association for Public Opinion. The following three essential practices are elements of good survey designs:

1. Defined specific goals

2. Select samples that are represent the population being studied.

3. Piloting or pretesting a questionnaire (Mertens, 2010)

Personal interviews allowed the researcher to make personal connections with the interviewee. Mertens (2010) suggests that the researcher is the instrument when collecting qualitative data through the use of personal interviews. The follow-up interviews were used to gain clarification of information that could be sensitive or not easily reported. Mertens (2010) suggests strategies for starting and conducting a good interview. The following are four strategies of quality interviewing procedures:

1. Start by establishing a rapport

2. Focus your attention on what the person is saying

3. Use a framework for constructive criticism when asking for things that may have challenged a program or process

4. Ask for examples and put their answers into perspective (Mertens, 2010)

3.4   RESEARCH POPULATION/ SAMPLE

The high schools were identified by their free, and reduced lunch rates of 30% or higher. Research in earlier chapters has proven that impoverished communities and public schools face many challenges. The researcher utilized a Microsoft excel spread sheet from the Pennsylvania Department of Education 2012 data report on all PA school districts with free and reduced numbers. The researcher was able to identify 66 Western Pennsylvania high schools that qualified for this study. Approximately 66 high school building principals were surveyed via Qualtrics. Their schools are all members of, and compete in the Western PA Interscholastic Athletic League (WPIAL), which allows the researcher access to these administrators through the organization. Based on the data collected from the survey, 10 principals were selected to participant in a follow-up interview. These schools were selected as a purposeful sample in order access to the principals and their email addresses as well as the researcher's relationship to the group, in hopes to get high levels of participation. The sample of the 66 Western Pennsylvania high schools varied in enrollment size, type, and free and reduced lunch percentage. Eighteen schools in the sample were junior/senior high schools. They housed grades 7-12. The rest of the sample was made up of 48 high schools housing grades 9-12. The junior/ senior high schools ranged in total enrollment of 290 to 1020. The traditional high school configuration had total

enrollments ranging from 308 to 1310. The free and reduced lunch rate for all the schools in the sample ranged 30 percent to 90 percent.

3.5   SURVEY INSTRUMENT

Survey respondents completed the survey exclusively online and independently. Fowler (1995) suggests five basic characteristics of questions and answers that are fundamental to a good measurement process:

1. Questions need to be consistently understood.

2. Questions need to be consistently administered to respondents.

3. What constitutes an adequate answer should be consistently communicated.

4. Unless measuring knowledge is the goal of the question, all respondents should have access to the information needed to answer the question accurately.

5. Respondents must be willing to provide the answers called for in the question. (pg. 4)

The goal of the survey was to give respondents enough latitude to answer the questions related to the topic of alternative education, regardless of their experiences or school district's current alternative opportunities. Every respondent had a unique set of circumstances based on the different processes that their school districts may have historically utilized. Survey questions related directly to each research question. The researcher utilized Qualtrics as the program in which to design the survey, and collect and store the data. For the sake of convenience, time, and narrow financial resources, the survey was administered via email.

The survey was comprised of 21 closed and one opened question. The survey instrument was piloted in a surveyed research class at the University of Pittsburgh, as well as with five

assistant high school principals at a local Pennsylvania high school. Mertens (2010) explains that piloting a survey is critical to ensuring the quality of the survey questions as well as it provides an opportunity to make necessary modifications. The survey tool was modified and the questions were reorganized to make data collection process simpler. The scale on two questions was changed to eliminate the participant's ability to select a neutral answer. Also, the researcher received feedback on approximately how long the survey took to complete.

A copy of the letter of intervention and survey was sent to each participate in the study via email, and the documents will be included as appendix A and B. The following chart reflects the themes of the study's research questions and how they directly correlate to the survey questions. Each portion of questions on the survey attempted to provide insight into each theme.

Table 6. Survey Themes/Survey Questions/Literature Themes

Survey Themes	Survey Questions	Literature Themes
Utilization of Alternative Programs	Questions 1-5	Historical Perspective
Value of Alternative Education Programs	Questions 6-12	Practices/ Approaches
Aligning Efforts	Questions 13-17	Characteristics of Students and Needs
Planning and Communication	Questions 18-21	Characteristics of Students and Needs

The research questions and themes of the survey instrument relates to the analysis established in the review of literature. The three larger themes in the review are historical perspective, practices, and approach to establish educational alternatives, and characteristics of alternative students. The section of the literature review related to the historical perspective of alternative education highlighted the historical implications, and the reasoning for current education alternatives that are available to school aged children. The first section of the survey

asked for ways in which school districts currently utilize alternative schooling. The responses depended on their district's historical needs and experiences.

The second section of the survey focused on the traditional principals' opinions on the value of alternative programs. The value related to the second section of the literature review about the practical and pragmatic approach to educating nontraditional youth. Organizational approaches and best practice instruction could influence the survey respondents based on their experiences with transient students.

The last two sections of the survey were associated with the type of student that attends alternative education programs. Transient students exhibit characteristics explained in the last portion of the literature review. School districts need to align their efforts through means of communication and planning to ensure this large population of students receives a quality education.

3.6   INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Participants were chosen based on their responses to survey questions 1, 5, 6, 7, 10, 11, 12, 13, 16, 17, 18, 19, 20, and 21. The researcher was looking for a profile of a respondent that had experiences utilizing and engaging with alternative schools. Survey questions 1 and 5 highlights if the respondent uses alternative programs and if tuition payments are involved. Questions 6,7,10,11,12,13 define the depth in which the respondents use these programs. Understanding the frequency and details of what type of programs principals use helped the research gather rich data and select quality candidates for the prospective follow up interviews. The remainder of the questions attempted to gather details about the alternative schools and the principals' experiences

with transient students and the necessary communication between the alternative programs and the sending schools.   Those questions represented each section of the survey and they relate directly back to the research questions. Table seven shows the relationship between the research questions and the sections of the literature review. The final question of the survey asked principals if they are interested in participating in a follow- up interview. Principals were asked to respond to the last question by leaving their name and email address if they were interested because the surveys are administered anonymously. After gathering the names of interested participants, the researcher then emailed the volunteer to set up a 30-minute phone interview. Principals are extremely busy at the start of a new school year so the interviews needed to be brief so their school environment is not interrupted. The goal was to get principals to respond candidly about their experiences. With that in mind, the researcher only took notes and did not record the interviews.   As shown in Table eight, the interview questions align to research questions and supporting literature.

Table 7. Alignment of the Interview Questions to Research Questions and Supporting Review of Literature

Interview Questions	Survey Themes	Survey Questions	Literature Themes
2 & 6	Utilization of Alternative Programs	1-5	Historical Perspective
3	Value of Alternative Education Programs	6-12	Practices/ Approaches
4 & 7	Aligning Efforts	13-17	Characteristics of Students and meeting their needs
1 & 5	Planning and Communication	18-21	Characteristics of Students and meeting their needs

Interview Questions

1. What type of protocol does your building administration use to refer a student to an alternative program? PDE's referral process? District developed process? Alternative schools process?

2. Have the number of students attending alternative education programs increased and decreased? What do you think is influencing those decisions?

3. Based on your opinion and experience, what components of alternative programs would be ideal for your school district?

4. What is your opinion of the educational alternatives that are available for your students?

5. Do you feel that you have sufficient Communication between the alternative programs you utilized and your high school? Compare the communication external and Internal? What would you change about the communication?

6. Are there any local/ state policies or mandates that hinder your success dealing with transient students attending or returning from alternative programs?

7. Do you have any information that was not addressed in the earlier questions that you would like to include about your alternative education?

Mertens (2010) suggest that good interview questions should be pretested in a pilot or mock interview to ensure the questions are understood and the language is universal. The interview needs to have conversational components and the questions need to be open-ended. The different types of interview questions that could be utilized are demographic, behavioral, knowledge, experience, opinion or value, feeling, sensory, and/ or attitude questions (Mertens, 2010, Pg. 243). The follow-up interview is necessary to extend the participants thinking of the topic. A good researcher should probe unclear responses and be willing to turn over control of

the interview at any time so the respondents can raise issues that the researcher may have omitted (Mertens, 2010).

3.7   DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES

An initial email was sent to 66 high school principals on August 30, 2014 explaining the purpose of the survey, length, link to the survey, details about a possible follow-up interview, and other basic information. The last question on the survey asked participants if they are interested in a follow-up interview. The researcher sent a follow up email asking for a timely response to all non-respondent traditional principals approximately 10 days after the original request. The survey data was collected electronically through Qualtrics, and imported into an excel spreadsheet. The researcher selected interviewees based on their survey responses and their willingness to participate. The researcher made arrangements to conduct phone interviews with the volunteers. Notes were taken by the researcher but the interviews were not recorded. All collected data was securely maintained in accordance with the regulations of the University of Pittsburgh IRB. The University of Pittsburgh Institutional Review Board granted permission to conduct this exempt study.

3.8   DATA COLLECTION ANALYSIS

The survey tool consisted of twenty-two questions, with an estimated completion time of 15 minutes. Approximately 15 educators in a doctorate level survey research course at the

University of Pittsburgh piloted the survey. The survey consisted of three open ended questions, nineteen closed ended, and two contingency questions seeking further clarification if the answer is yes. The questions were designed by theme in order to answer the four research questions. The survey was developed with several response scales to ensure that all respondents have the ability to answer the questions accurately based on their experiences. 15 closed ended questions are asking for distinctive answers that are provided in a list. Four questions asked the respondent to rate the quality and/or importance of the respondent's experience. The quantitative data collected from the closed ended questions were analyzed with the Qualitrics program to show the various degrees of tendency within the themes of each section of the survey instrument. Several summaries about the sample and data collected were analyzed with visual representation and qualitative descriptions of the statistics gathered. The data analysis allowed for the following research questions to be addressed:

Table 8. Survey Questions/Themes

Themes	Research Questions
Utilization of Alternative Programs	
Questions 1-5	What type of alternative education programs do traditional principals utilize?
Value of Alternative Education Programs	
Questions 6-12	How much do traditional principals value alternative education programs?
Aligning Efforts	
Questions 13-17	How can traditional principals better align their efforts with alternative programs in order to promote student success?
Planning and Communication	
Questions 18-21	What are traditional principals' perspectives on improving the alternative education process in order to better support at-risk youth transitioning back into public high schools?

The data from the interviews with traditional high school principals' generated qualitative information to analyze the tone of the principals' experiences and allowed the researcher to develop a sense of principals' opinions of ideal alternative programming. The researcher used the

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notes that were taken during the interviews to begin the coding process capturing the themes and concepts mentioned. Hess-Biber and Leavy (2006) describe three strategies for analyzing qualitative data. The first step is the researcher should prepare the data for analysis by either transcribing the interview or organizing the files and notes. Steps two and three are the data exploration phases and data reduction. The researcher should read through the data and make notes or memos so nothing is lost in the coding phase. For example, an important quote from the respondent should be highlighted and noted in a memo. Also, the researcher should reduce the information to a manageable size that can be used for reporting (Mertens, 2010). The themes or categorizes were identified by similarities in the data, such as conditions, context, strategies, and consequences (Corbin and Strauss, 2008). The coding process the researcher utilized is a narrative analysis designed to build a story that can connect the themes of the interviews. "Allow the codes to emerge and be revised if necessary, especially in the early stages of coding" (Mertens, 2010, Pg. 428). The narratives create an in-depth analysis of the traditional principals' responses to the interview questions, which will help connect to the literature reviewed to the research questions.

3.9   SUMMARY

This chapter discussed the methodology and specific procedures utilized to establish insight into the traditional principals' perspectives of alternative education. This chapter was guided by the relationship of the common themes the emerged within the literature review to the survey instrument. The correspondence between the literature review and the study creates a data analysis for quality facts in pursuit of the research questions. Chapter three presented the

problem, research questions, population studied, survey tool, interview questions, data collection, and data analysis procedures. The data will be analyzed and presented in Chapter four against the research questions to determine the findings. A summary of findings, conclusions, implications of practice, and recommendations for further research will be the included in Chapter five.

4.0 FOURTH CHAPTER: FINDINGS

4.1 INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this study was to access 66 traditional principals' perceptions of transient alternative education students and the impact it has on Western Pennsylvania public high schools. Of the 66 principals leading local high schools, 20 principals (30%) responded to a twenty-two-question survey. A relatively low survey response rate influenced the need for ten follow-up interviews that were conducted by the researcher.

All the schools involved in the study are located in Western Pennsylvania and they represent all types of school cultures (rural, suburban, and urban). The respondents were ensured anonymity in the survey invitation. The ten principals interviewed volunteered to participate through their survey responses. The researcher targeted several survey questions to determine which principals would provide quality feedback, but due to a low response rate all ten principals who volunteered, were interviewed. Of the interviewees, five were principals of urban high schools, two were from suburban school districts, and two were rural school communities.

The interview script included seven questions that guided the interviews. It was a tool that generated rich in-depth discussions. Principals talked freely and candidly about their experiences and opinions of alternative education. The conversations between the researcher and

the principals did not always follow a script but they developed into rich discussions that were guided by the researcher.

The researcher developed four research questions to fulfill the purpose of this study. The next section is a presentation of the survey and interview data and findings as they relate to each research question.

4.2   RESEARCH QUESTION #1

What type of alternative education programs do traditional principals utilize?

Presentation of the Data Related to Research Question #1

This section is a presentation of the survey and interview findings as they relate to research question one. Survey questions one through five and interview questions two and six relate directly to the first research question and the literature themes related to historical perspective.

What type of alternative education programs do you currently have students

attending outside of the brick and mortar high school?
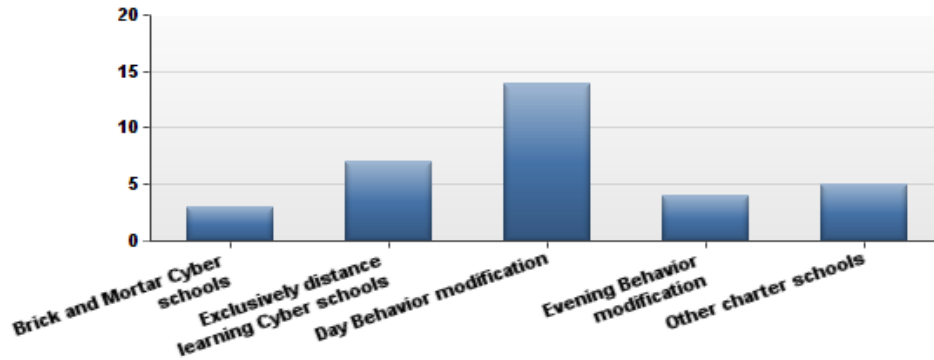
Figure 3. Alternative Education Programs

The researcher analyzed the responses to the survey questions one through five relating to the survey theme of "Utilization of Alternative programs". All the responding principals surveyed reported that they currently utilize multiple alternative educational choices that were offered in the first question. Fourteen principals (70%) reported that they use day behavior modification programs and four principals use evening behavior modification programs. 15% of principals said they use brick and mortar cyber schools, and 35% said they use distance learning cyber programs to manage their alternative education population. Five principals use other charter schools. Most principals choose multiple programs when reporting their answer to question one.

What type of alternative education programs does your district use?
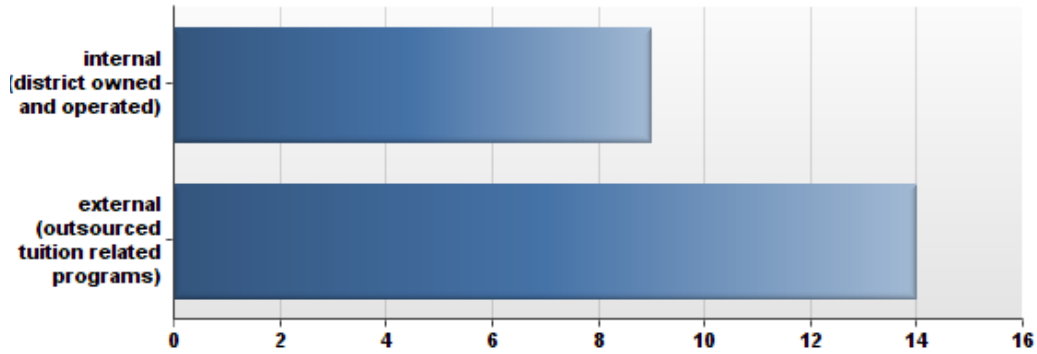
Figure 4. Internal or External Programs

Nine survey respondents reported that they use district owned and operated alternative education programs, while 14 principals said they utilize external programs that require tuition. The data confirms that of the twenty respondents, two principals reported that they use internal and external alternative education programs.

Do any of the alternative programs you utilize employ district teachers or

administrators?

Internal or External
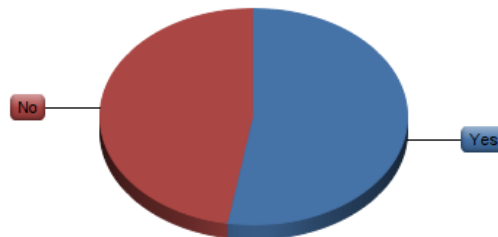
Figure 5. Employed District Employees

The pie chart above represents district employees working in alternative schools utilized by the respondents. 53% of responses were "yes", district employees operate the alternative schools utilized by the school districts. 47% said the alternative schools are not utilizing school district employees.

If Yes, which type of program and where is it located?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	internal(on district property)		7	70%
2	external (off district property)		4	40%

Figure 6. Employed District Staff Internal and External

Of the 53% of principals that said, "yes" that they utilize district staff in the alternative schools, seven are located on school property, and four are located off site.

Do any of your alternative programs accept students that require special education services?

Figure 7. Accepting Students with Disabilities

All respondents answered, "yes" that the schools they send their alterative population of students accept students that need special education services.

Does your district pay tuition to educate students in alternative education programs?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		17	89%
2	No		2	11%
	Total		19	100%

Figure 8. Tuition Paid for Alternative Education Students

All but one respondent answered the question whether or not their school district pays tuition to send students to alternative education programs. 89% of principals pay tuition for at least one student in their district to attend alternative schools, conversely; eleven percent does not pay tuition.

<u>**Interview Question # 2**</u>

Have the number of students attending alternative education programs increased and decreased? What do you think is influencing those decisions?

Ten follow-up interviews were done based on the survey results. Principals volunteered to discuss some of the relevant alternative education topics in depth to further support their survey responses. Interview question two aligns directly with research question one. The results from question two were coded based on common themes in relationship to research question one. The responses were placed in three categories based on whether or not the number of alternative students had increased, decreased, or remained the same. Four out of ten participants expressed concern, as the overall number of students attending alternative schools had increased in recent years. They attributed the recent influx to the following:

- The media's coverage and perception of bullying

- The idea of cyber schools advertising that they cater to the needs of students

- More advertising and public knowledge of educational alternatives

- School districts attempting to save money and creating less effective alternative programs to bring students back

- Avoid truancy consequences

- More charters schools opening

- Students needing mental health/ therapeutic environment

Five principals reported that the number of students attending educational alternatives has recently decreased. The following represents their opinion for what is influencing the decrease in students:

- School districts are not sending students out of the district to save money

- Struggling cyber students are returning after lack of academic success

- School districts offering more educational options

- More school district staff designated and focused on keeping students in the school district

Only one principal reported that the number of students leaving the district has remained the same. Students are returning from cyber schools, and other students that are attempting to avoid truancy charges are lost.

Interview Question #6

Are there any local/ state policies or mandates that hinder your success dealing with transient students attending or returning from alternative programs?

Interview question six aligns directly with research question one. The results from question six were coded based on common themes in relationship to research question one. Three of the principals interviewed mentioned the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Act. One high school does not have bussing which limits the costs for transporting homeless students to other schools. Another principal reported that they have recently hired a home school visitor that legitimizes a student's residence or lack thereof. All three principals said that homeless students contribute to an already transient population of students attending their schools.

The other principals mentioned issues such as lack of support for students with mental health issues and special education needs. A urban principal stated, "When is PDE going to give us more money to address all the new accountability they are putting on us". Examples of support could be available grants to employ more instructional assistants, or purchase more educational resources like technology or interactive materials. The Individual Education Plan (IEP) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) limits the principal's decisions. Several interviewees expressed their concerns with lack of funding to support special education, but unwelcomed additions of more state and federal mandates. Also, mentioned was the lack of restrictions on the amount of tuition that an alternative program can charge a school district for services. Some alternative schools have attempted to monopolize the competition by designing an environment to meet the needs of exclusive groups of students.

Summary of Findings Related to Research Question #1

What type of alternative education programs do traditional principals utilize?

The results of the survey clearly show that traditional principals utilize all five types of alternative education programs (brick and mortar cyber schools, distance learning cyber schools, day behavior modification, evening behavior modification, and other charter schools) offered in the survey. Day behavior modification programs are the most often utilized by principals to place students who are expelled, truant, or general disruptions to the educational environment. Most high school principals represented in the study utilize both internal and external programs. More than half of the staffs in the alternative programs utilized are employed by the school districts that give them influence over decisions such as curriculum, transitions, and finances. All of the alternative schools utilized by principals accept students with special needs and the majority of school districts pay tuition for some portion of their alternative population.

The overall numbers of alternative students and whether or not they are increasing or decreasing is split among principals interviewed. Participants said struggling cyber students are a large majority of the transient students who are leaving schools or returning to schools. The media coverage that charter cyber schools have recently purchased, as well as, the inconsistent academic progress has creating a large transient population. School districts are attempting to create as many cost effective educational options to keep students in their school districts.

Policies and mandates that effective public education such as the McKinney-Vento Homelessness Act and IDEA have created challenges for principals that participated in this study. A lack of financial support and funding, as the stakes rise on accountability, has left principals looking for more resources. Some of the principals' educational discretion has been

limited, due to policies and mandates. Rising costs of alternative education tuition and limited

decision making power has challenged high school principals in this study to do more with less.

4.3   RESEARCH QUESTION #2

To what degree do traditional principals value alternative education programs?

Why? Why not?

Presentation of the Data Related to Research Question #2

This section is a presentation of the survey and interview data and findings as they relate to

research question two. Survey questions 6-13 and interview question three relate directly to the

literature themes related to practice and approaches.

What are the discipline infractions that prompt placement of students in alternative

education programs?

#	Answer	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1	Drugs	6	9	2	1	0	1	0
2	Weapons	5	3	6	4	1	0	0

Figure 9. Discipline Infractions

The researcher analyzed the responses to the survey questions 6-13 relating to the survey

theme of "Utilization of Alternative Education". Figure 9 shows the ranking of the top two reason

students are sent to alternative placements. Principals were asked to rank the discipline

infractions one through seven. The numbers that are listed in the first row along the top of matrix

represents the ranking that the principal assigned to the frequency of the discipline infraction.

Drugs were the highest ranked discipline infraction in which students are sent, followed by

weapons. Overall, the third most common issue why principals send students to alternative schools is general school misconduct. The two infractions listed above usually result in some type of expulsion proceedings, or in the case of a student with an Individual Education Plan (IEP), a 45-day unilateral change in placement.

Is referring and moving a student to alternative education program a challenging process in your school district? If yes, explain some of the most important challenges.

Figure 10. Alternative Education Referral Process

The majority of the principals (70%) reported that moving a student to an alternative placement is not a challenging process, but five principals reported that it is a challenging process. Those principals were asked a follow up question to share some of the challenges. One principal reported "Lots of red tape. Often there is an unwillingness to accept a student for various reasons. IEP issues tend to slow the process." Another principal shared "Expensive for the district, transportation costs, convincing superior administrators that this is the right decision."

Rate the average time efficiency of your referral process? (*How long does the process take when a student is assigned to an alternative setting?*)

#	Answer		Response	%
1	1-3 days		6	32%
2	3-5 days		6	32%
3	5-10 days		5	26%
4	10 or more days		2	11%
	Total		19	100%

Figure 11. Efficiency of Referral Process

Figure 11 shows the overall efficiency in the number of days in moving students to an alternative school. The responses were somewhat evenly distributed. Six principals said one to three days, and six more reported three to five days. Five respondents answered 5-10 days and two principals said 10 or more days. The significance of the two respondents says 10 or more days is that a student can only be suspended for up to ten days before a change a placement is necessary. If it takes more than ten days to move a student, it is likely that the student has to return to the high school environment until the placement is available.

How often do students choose to leave the district for alternative means of education?
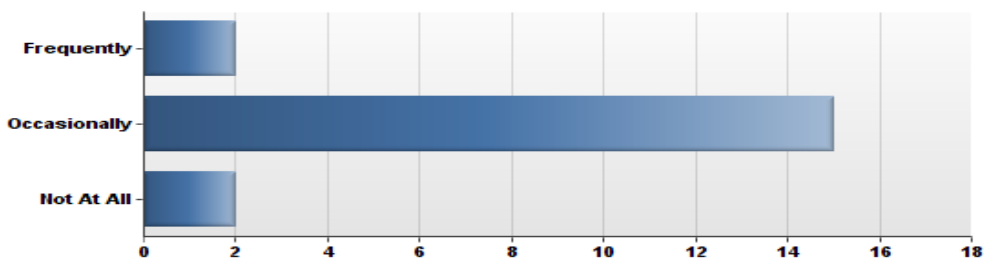
Figure 12. Students Choosing to Leave

According to chapter two, transient students are often at-risk of graduating. Fifteen principals reported that students occasionally leave their district to attend alternative means of education. The popular choices are online learning opportunities and charter schools. Two

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principals reported that students leave frequently, and two others reported that students do not leave at all. Some communities have more educational options, as well as, some families are more informed of the educational alternatives than others.

Approximately how many students have you placed in alternative education programs in the past two years?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Internal 1-5		2	11%
2	Internal 6-10		1	5%
3	Internal 11-15		1	5%
4	Internal 16 or more		5	26%
5	External 1-5		5	26%
6	External 6-10		6	32%
7	External 11-15		2	11%
8	External 16 or more		2	11%

Figure 13. Students Choosing to Leave

Of the 20 respondents, six of them use both internal and external placements for their alternative student population. Five principals reported that they placed more than 16 students in internal alternative school settings in the past two years. Two principals reported they sent more than 16 students to external alternative school placements that likely required the school district to pay tuition. The financial burden is likely significant for the 15 principals that are sending students to external programs.

How regularly do students return to your high school within the *same year* they are placed?
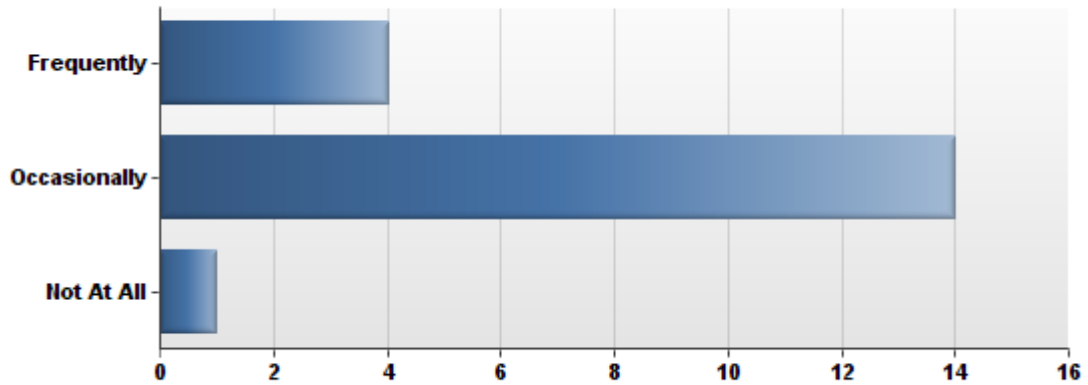
Figure 14. Transient Students Returning Within the Same Year

14 respondents reported that occasionally students return to the sending school within the same school year after being placed in an alternative program. Four principals shared that students frequently return to their respective schools after spending part of the year at an alternative education option. Only one principal reported that students do not return to the sending school during the same school year. One principal did not respond.

Do you have established criteria that students must meet in order to transition back in to your high school?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		15	79%
2	No		4	21%
	Total		19	100%

Figure 15. Students to Transitioning Back

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Behavioral		15	100%
2	Attendance		13	87%
3	Academic		12	80%

Figure 16. Criteria for Students to Transition Back

Figure 15 shows that 70% of the principals that responded to the survey have established criteria for students to return from an alternative setting. Of those principals, 100% of them have behavioral expectations, 87% of them have attendance expectations, and 80% of them have academic expectations.

How would you rate your relationship with the leadership of the alternative education program(s) you utilize, regardless of whether they are internal or external?

#	Answer		Response
1	Internal Poor		1
2	Internal Fair		0
3	Internal Good		2
4	Internal Very Good		0
5	Internal Excellent		4
6	External Poor		1
7	External Fair		1
8	External Good		5
9	External Very Good		3
10	External Excellent		8

Figure 17. Rating of Relationships with Leadership of Alternative Schools

The chart above rates the principals' relationships with the leadership of the alternative programs they utilize. Respondents were able to choose more than one answer, therefore, more

than 20 responses from the twenty survey participants. Five principals rated their experience with both internal and external programs. 12 principals have excellent relationships with internal and external alternative education schools. Only two principals rated their experiences as poor. Through the follow-up interview process the researcher got more specific information based on the type of program. This survey question did not provide the opportunity for principals to discuss this issue in-depth.

Interview Question #3

Based on your opinion and experience, what components of alternative programs would be ideal for your school district?

10 follow-up interviews were done based on the need for a more in-depth discussion. Principals volunteered to discuss some of the relevant alternative education topics. Interview question three aligns directly with research question two. The results from question three were coded based on common themes in relationship to research question two. Five principals expressed the need for more therapeutic educational environments for students with mental health needs and severe emotional disturbance. One principal said, "there is no magic bullet to support all the students with unique needs, but instead finding a couple programs with good reputations that will communicate with you". All the principals interviewed agreed that ideally their school district would like to own and operate the educational alternatives to keep costs down, as well as, improve communication. There was a split opinion about whether or not the alternative program should be housed on campus or off campus property. Another important theme that was discussed is the idea of aligning social services and bringing them into the school environment to

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support struggling students and families. Too many families do not follow through with the necessary counseling or get the necessary help that at-risk students often require.

<div align="center">**Summary of Findings Related to Research Question #2**</div>

<div align="center">**To what degree do traditional principals value alternative education programs?**</div>

<div align="center">**Why? Why not?**</div>

The results from the survey revealed that traditional principals depend on alternative schools and they have various opinions about the value of the different programs. Drug and weapon violations are the most common reasons students are mandated to attend an alternative program, actions consistent with need for behavioral modification programs. A quarter of the traditional principals that participated in this study recognized that it is a challenging process to get students into other programs, as well as it takes five or more days to get a student started in an alternative school. All but two principals also reported placing five or more students in the last two years. The frequency in which students are being placed, as well as the process of placing does not seem to agree. The need for a multiple alternative placements and the inability of sending and receiving schools to quickly refer students, share records, and secure transportation leaves districts waiting for answers and students excluded from school. Also, the survey results included that fourteen out of nineteen principals have transient students returning to the sending school within the same school year creating many concerns such as curricular differences, transition, truancy, and possible repeat offenses.

More than half of the participants rated their relationship with external alternative schools lower than internal alternative programs. District owned and operated programs are more likely to address curricular issues and transitioning better than external programs. Principals reported in interviews that they ideally would prefer getting alternative students off campus to limit their

<div align="center">90</div>

ability to disrupt the education of others, while other principals would rather have more control of the alternative environment. About half the principals said they would like to keep students on campus and flood them with social and family services, and try to get them back into the traditional high school environment. One principal used a magic bullet analogy stating that finding a program that can meet many of the unique needs of all at-risk students and communicate with the sending school would be an ideal situation for his students.

4.4   RESEARCH QUESTION #3

How do traditional principals align their efforts with alternative programs in order to promote student success?

Presentation of the Data Related to Research Question #3

This section is a presentation of the survey and interview data and findings as they relate to research question three. Survey questions 14-18 and interview questions four and seven relate directly the literature themes connected to characteristics of students and meeting their needs.

Who is responsible for communicating with the alternative education programs in order to place a student, or create a plan for a student transitioning back to your building?

Figure 18. Communication with Alternative Schools

The researcher analyzed the responses to the survey questions 14-17 relating to the survey theme of "Aligning Efforts". Figure 18 shows that the principal is commonly the educator that communicates with alternative placements during times of transition. Assistant principals and central office personnel are a little less likely than principals to be responsible for the communication. Also, six principals reported that a guidance counselor is primarily responsible for communication with alternative schools during time of transition.

Do the Alternative programs you utilize have curricula that are aligned to the

Common Core Standards?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		11	58%
2	No		1	5%
3	Not Sure		7	37%
	Total		19	100%

Figure 19. Curriculum Aligned to Common Core

Eleven principals reported that the alternative schools that they utilize have curricula aligned to the Common Core. Only one principal shared that they were sure that the school's curricula was not aligned to the Common Core. Seven respondents were unsure.

Assuming a student must graduate from an alternative education school, do they have to meet the same graduation requirements as the sending school students?
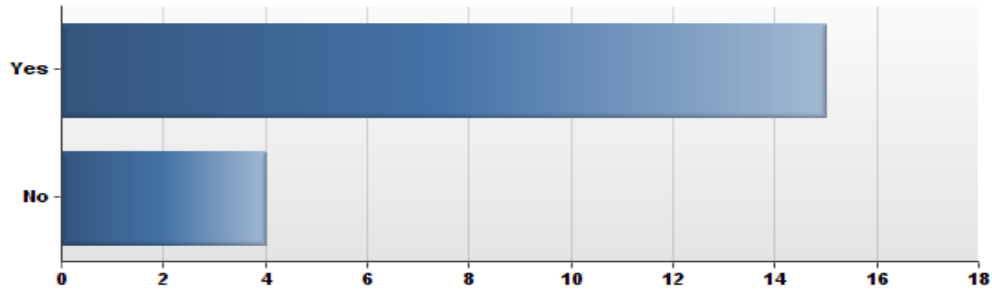
Figure 20. Meeting Graduation Requirements of Sending School

Figure 20 shows that 15 principals responded to the survey that students must meet the graduation requirements of the sending school to get a diploma. The sending school is the school in which the student is coming from or their "home school". Four principals said students did not have to fulfill the sending schools graduation requirements.

Do you believe that you have sufficient quality educational options available to you, when you have to refer students who require an alternative education setting?

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Yes		9	47%
2	No		10	53%
	Total		19	100%

Figure 21. Alternative Educational Options

If No, what additional options would you prefer?

Text Response
Lack of quality placement for students experiencing severe psychological/emotional issues. Due to location, we are very limited in the placements that we can use. More options would be helpful.
Rigorous curriculum
District run program
Distance Learning that does not require a teacher of record; a contractual change!
There is a difference between disruptive youth, policy violations (D&A), mental health and special education (within reason) needs.
When our internal alternative education students are not successful, I would like to be able to send them to an external alternative education setting
Programs with a therapeutic component
I would like to have more options than the two that we have currently. Not every kid fits into the two programs we use. The ultimate goal is to help the child, which in some cases we are just using the facility to get them out of our building that adds to the cycle of failure.

Figure 22. Alternative Educational Open Ended Responses

Figure 21 represents principals' opinions on whether or not they feel that they have enough educational options to meet the needs of all their students. About half felt confident that they have enough educational alternatives, whereas the other half of respondents felt they are lacking options. Figure 22 shows all the opened ended responses of principals that struggle with providing educational opportunities for their students. Some of the themes represented in the open-ended answers include a therapeutic environment, strictly external programs, strictly internal programs, distance learning, and more options for students with mental health issues.

Which type of alternative programs have you had the best experience working with
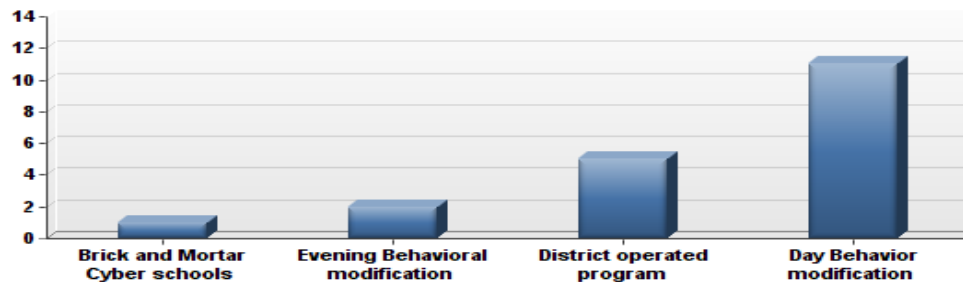
and that you prefer sending students?

Figure 23. Type of Alternative Schools with Best Experience Working Relationship

Interview Question #4

What is your opinion of the educational alternatives that are available for your students?

10 follow-up interviews were done based on the need for a more in-depth discussion. Principals volunteered to discuss some of the relevant alternative education topics. Interview question four aligns directly with research question three. The results from question four were coded based on common themes in relationship to research question three. All 10 principals agreed that there are not enough educational alternatives available for students with severe special education needs and/or mental health concerns. One principal stated, "No one wants a student with an IEP" within the context of describing some of the external alternative programs that are located near their high school. Location of the educational alternatives can also be an issue. For example, an alternative program may be located too far away from some home schools. Principals also expressed concerns with limited spaces available for students that need alternative education. Principals mentioned social services and family counseling again as a necessary component for support of struggling students.

Interview Question #7

Do you have any information that was not addressed in the earlier questions that you would like to include about your alternative education?

This question was an open-ended opportunity for the interviewees to address concerns that may have been missed in the interview. The results of interview question seven aligns to research question three. The results from question seven were coded based on common themes in relationship to research question three. Six principals offered other relevant concerns and they are listed below:

- Significant difference in the levels of support between Allegheny county schools and Westmoreland county schools with social services, juvenile probation, transitioning of transient students, etc. (Fewer Westmoreland county schools seem to have more in-depth supports versus many more Allegheny county schools that seem to struggle to service all their needs)

- Cohort issues as it relates to graduation rates and credit deficiencies for transient students

- Financial concerns with no available grants to support at-risk students

- More than one high school in a district and managing the transient student between the two schools

- Resources exhausted on transient students and alternative schooling

- No transitioning for returning students from educational alternatives

Summary of Findings Related to Research Question #3

How do traditional principals align their efforts with alternative programs in order

to promote student success?

The findings of this section showed that principals, assistant principals, and central administrator are primarily responsible for communicating with alternative schools. More than half of the principals surveyed shared that alternative schools they use have curricula aligned with Common Core standards. Also, the majority of principals reported that students had to meet the sending high school's graduation requirements to receive a diploma. Those responses indicate that some efforts are being made to support larger organizational expectations such as curricula and graduation. About half of the participants reported that there are not enough education options available for students in need of a therapeutic environment or students with mental health needs. Most principals in this study agreed that they have had the best experience working with and utilizing a day behavioral modification program. Some evening behavioral modification programs are educating students too, but they struggle to communicate because of the differences in the hours of operation.

Student success can be defined as the student returning from the alternative environment, and transitioning smoothly back into the sending high school. Some respondents shared that there is need for more local programs and available space. Coordinating community services is a recurring theme that most principals shared as a way to support transient at-risk students. Another theme that was discussed by several principals during the interviews was the discrepancy between the counties such as Allegheny and Westmoreland. Allegheny county services and support seem to be overwhelmed, and unable to truly support struggling teens and their families. Whereas, Westmoreland County has fewer students and schools to services, and

they seem to work closer with schools and more in-depth with families. The alignment of efforts between alternative programs and traditional high school principals seems to begin with more communication but branches out to the local communities, county, and state levels so that schools have resources to support transient students.

4.5   RESEARCH QUESTION #4

What are traditional principals' perspectives on improving the alternative education process in order to better support at-risk youth transitioning back into public high schools?

Presentation of the Data Related to Research Question #4

This section is a presentation of the survey and interview data and findings as they relate to research question four. Survey questions 19-21, and interview questions one and five relates directly to the literature themes related to characteristics of meeting student's need.

Is a transition plan created for every student that is placed in, or returning from placement?
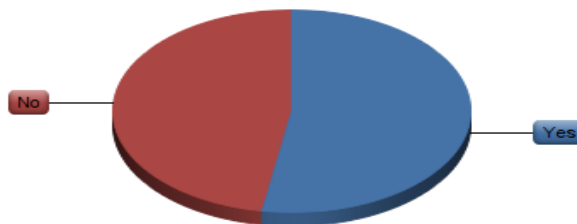
Returning from Placement

Figure 24. Transition Plan

The researcher analyzed the responses to the survey questions 19-21 relating to the survey theme of "Planning and Communication". The pie chart above shows that fifty-three percent of principals have an established transition plan for students that are returning from an alternative setting. Nine principals do not have an established transition plan for returning students.

Rate the communication between your school and any Alternative Programs.

#	Answer		Response	%
1	Excellent		5	26%
2	Good		9	47%
3	Average		4	21%
4	Poor		1	5%
	Total		19	100%

Figure 25. Communication with Alternative Schools

The respondents were asked to rate the communication between their school and any alternative schools they utilize. Only one principal responded that their communication is poor. Four (21%) principals said their communication is average and fourteen (73%) said they have good or excellent communication.

Do you have any information that was not addressed in the earlier questions that

you would like to include about your alternative education?

Text Response
We utilize an offsite county consortium eAcademy and off site brick and mortar alternative education program for students who are referred for the violations in rank order,(I'm not sure if the ranking on Question # 7 recorded) 1. Drugs 2. Weapons 3. Truancy 4. Fighting 5. General Misconduct 6. Alcohol 7. other infractions
Our brick and mortar evening program provides select pupils with a means to be successful in a non-traditional, "alternative" setting. Though the means to an education may be different, the curriculum and expectations remain the same, as does the desired end: attainment of a high-school diploma and (ultimately) an education.
We have changed our alternative program each year for the last three years.
In a strictly alternative education sense, we follow the AEDY guidelines and the seven indicators of a disruptive student necessary for placement

Figure 26. Opened Ended Responses

The above figure shows the four open ended responses offered by the responding principals in this study.

Interview Question #1

What type of protocol does your building administration use to refer a student to an alternative program? PDE's referral process? District developed process? Alternative schools process?

Ten follow-up interviews were done based on the need for a more in-depth discussion. Principals volunteered to discuss some of the relevant alternative education topics. Interview question one aligns directly with research question four. The results from question one were coded based on common themes in relationship to research question four. When asked what type of alternative education protocol they utilize, three principals responded that they use the Pennsylvania Department of Education's (PDE) protocol, or the IEP process. Six participants said they use district-generated forms and one principal admitted that they do not have a formal process and they are moving towards utilizing PDE's protocol. One principal stated that their new superintendent is expecting them to move towards PDE's protocol but due to turnover in the

100

district "we haven't nailed it down". If a student's placement is changed because they are deemed as a disruptive youth under PDE's definition, the state's protocol is mandatory, even if the alternative school is owned and operated within the district. If a student leaves the district for alternative education such as a cyber-school or another charter school opportunity, the school district can determine the protocol or process they will use.

Interview Question #5

Do you feel that you have sufficient communication between the alternative programs you utilize and your high school? Compare the external and internal communication. What would you change about the communication?

Interview question five aligns directly with research question four. The results from question five were coded based on common themes in relationship to research question four. The responses were placed in two categories based on whether or not they had good communication, and if the programs were internal or external of their school district. There were mixed responses by most of the principals interviewed. Three participants said that the communication with their internal programs was excellent, but external providers struggle with communication. Issues consist of student progress, transitioning, and attendance. One principal said that they had positive experiences with their external alternative programs and they have established monthly meetings to discuss students. Seven principals expressed frustration with communication with all alternative schools. Also, they shared concerns with getting accurate records in a timely manner, and the lack of preparation being made for students returning to their schools.

Summary of Findings Related to Research Question #4

What are traditional principals' perspectives on improving the alternative education process in order to better support at-risk youth transitioning back into public high schools?

The survey and interview results showed that approximately half of the principals that responded do not have transition plans in place for alternative education students. A transition plan could help determine if a student is ready or has the necessary coping skills to transition back into the least restrictive environment. The results from one survey question in this section slightly contradicted the results of a related interview question about communication. The results survey question showed that principals rated their communication with alternative schools somewhat favorably. During the interview process, principals discussed their frustration with communication based on the individual program or school. Programs that operate externally from school districts seemed to struggle with communication and transition planning.

Interesting components worth mentioning in this section are the processes and types of alternative referrals that are being used by the participants. If a student meets the requirements of a disruptive youth according to the Pennsylvania Department of Education's definition, then the sending school must complete PDE's mandated referral process. Many schools represented in this study are not using the protocol, or they are attempting to move in that direction. The results show that school districts with internal alternative programs are more likely to use PDE's protocol than external programs. A fear of an audit type situation may have recently influenced school districts to adopt the thorough mandated protocol.

5.0   FIFTH CHAPTER: CONCLUSION

5.1   INTRODUCTION

This study was conducted by surveying and interviewing traditional principals to gather their perspective of alternative education with the current mandates and policies micro-managing the use and funding of alternative education. The data collected in this study provides in-depth insight into the high school principal's experience of servicing students through the use of alternative education. The major themes and findings of the study are as follows:

- Types of alternative programs

- Necessary communication between sending and receiving schools

- Current policies and mandates

- Value of the alternative school programming

- Frequency of student placements and transiency

- Ideal program locations and relationships

- Coordinating social services

- Use of Common Core standards

- Transitioning students

- Referral process

This chapter will explore the overall findings of the study and connect the answers of the four research questions to the literature discussed in chapter two. The researcher will offer a reflection of future practice based on his findings and his personal work as a practitioner as an urban high school principal in western Pennsylvania. Recommendations for future research will also be discussion in this chapter, highlighting a different viewpoint for conducting a similar studies based on the findings of this study. Financial limitations and the lack of policies supporting the public schools in the alternative school discussion will be included in the discussion about future research. This chapter will conclude with remarks from the researcher about the overall study and feelings about the future of alternative education.

5.2 OVERVIEW OF FINDINGS

This study evolved from an exclusive survey related model to an added interview process in order to explore in-depth the traditional principal's alternative education experiences and opinions. The survey instrument and interview questions were established based on the research questions, and they were aligned with the literature review completed in chapter two. The findings were introduced in chapter four (based on each research question) which aligned with the literature themes in chapter two. In this section, the researcher will provide examples from the literature that connect both directly and indirectly with some overall findings of the study.

The matrix below represents all of the components of the study, as well, the major research studies that were include in the literature review.

Table 9. Overview of Findings

Research Questions	Survey & Interview Themes	Literature Themes	Literature	Findings
1. What type of alternative education programs do traditional principals utilize?	Utilization of Alternative Programs	Historical Perspective	Lange, C. M., & Sletten, S. J. (2002). Alternative education: A brief history and research synthesis. *National Association of State Directors of Special Education*: Alexandria, VA. Barr, R. D., & Parrett, W. H. (2001). *Hope fulfilled for at-risk and violent youth: K-12 programs that work (2nd ed.).* Needham Heights, MA: Allyn and Bacon. Carver, P. R., and Lewis, L. (2010). *Alternative Schools and Programs for Public School Students At Risk of Educational Failure: 2007–08*(NCES 2010–026). U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. Washington, DC: Government Printing Office.	- Various Programs utilized (brick and mortar cyber schools, distance learning, & day/ evening behavior modification) - Students with special needs are accepted in those programs - McKinney-Vento Act & IDEA limits principals' discretion
2. How much do traditional principals value alternative education programs?	Value of Alternative Education Programs	Practices/ Approaches	Raywid, M.A. (1994). *Alternative schools: The state of the art.* Educational Leadership, 52(1), Exemplary Practices in Alternative Education: Indicators of Quality Programming 26-31. Raywid, M.A. (1998). The journey of alternative schools movement: where it's been and where it's going. *The High School Magazine.* 6 (2), 10-14. Kellmayer, J. (1998). Building educational alternative for at-risk youth: A primer. *The High School Magazine.* 6 (2), 26-31.	- Weapon and drug violations top list of alternative placements - Behavior modification programs are utilized most frequently - Alternative placements take time to accept students - The majority of schools in the study have multiple students moving between sending and receiving schools (transient) - Concerns about curricular differences, transitions, truancy, & repeat offenders
3. How can traditional principals better align their efforts with alternative programs in order to promote student success?	Aligning Efforts	Characteristics of Students and meeting their needs	Ruzzi, B., & Kraemer, J. (2006). *Academic programs in alternative education: An overview.* Washington, DC: Government Printing Office Pennsylvania Department of Education (2013). *2013-15 Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth Program Guidelines.* Retrieved September 1, 2013, from http://www.portal.state.pa.us/portal/server.pt/community/alternative_education_for_distruptive_youth_%28aedy%29/7318 Balfanz, R., Bridgeland, J., Fox, J. & M. McNaught (2008) *Grad Nation: A Guidebook to Help Communities Tackle the Dropout Crisis.* Everyone Graduates Center and Civic Enterprises for the America's Promise Alliance.	- Graduation requirements are same as sending schools - Not enough educational alternatives - Day behavior modification programs have the best communication with home schools - Need more programs for students with special needs - Differences between available services and depth of care based on the different counties represented
4. What are traditional principals' perspectives on improving the alternative education process in order to better support at-risk youth transitioning back into public high schools?	Planning and Communication	Characteristics of Students and meeting their needs	Payne, R. (2005). A framework for understanding poverty. *Highlands*, TX. AHA! Process, Inc. Lewis, O. (1961). *The children of Sanchez: Autobiography of a Mexican family.* NewYork: Random House. Lewis, O. (1963/1998). The culture of poverty. *Society*, 35 (2), 7–9. Lewis, O. (1966). *La vida: A Puerto Rican family in the culture of poverty—San Juanand New York.* New York: Random House. Lewis, O. (1968). *A study of slum culture: Backgrounds for La vida.* New York: Random House. Lensmire, T. & Sato, M. (2009). Poverty and Payne: Supporting teachers to work with children of poverty. *Phi Delta Kappan*, 90 (5) 365-370. Gorski, P. (2007). Savage unrealities: Classism and racism abound in Ruby Payne's framework. *Rethinking Schools, 21*(2), 16-19. Gorski, P. (2008). Peddling poverty for profit: Elements of oppression in Ruby Payne's framework. *Equity and Excellence in Education*, 41(1) 130-148, 2008	- Need for transition plans for students - Communication between sending schools external alternative schools needs to improve - The referral process and PDE protocol is not utilized consistently and it is different from school to school - Contradiction between survey and interview question related to communication - Distinction made between communication with internal and external alternative schools

The findings of research question one pertained to the utilization of programs, and they confirmed that principals utilize various alternative education programs. The historical perspective of alternative education in chapter two concluded that the steady growth of alterative

programming is because all students cannot be educated in a traditional classroom in public school districts. According to Carver & Lewis (2010) alternative school populations have grown nationwide to 646,500 students. Lack of resources and a decline of effective teachers has hindered academic achievement of transient students, as well as, slowed public school districts' ability to meet the unique needs of all children. Technology will also continue to influence and support alternative education options.

The analysis of organizational practices and pragmatic approaches in chapter two showed commonalities with research question two about exploring the value of alternative programs. The findings suggested that traditional principals rely on and value alternative programming tremendously. The data collected in this study supports that all types of alternative programs are currently being utilized by principals and they are necessary for school districts that are attempting to meet the needs of all their students. Raywid (1994) defines the types of alternative programs and the findings of this study reinforce that the design of those types of programs are still currently utilized and valued by principals. For example, educational alternatives have shifted in the direction of technology based concepts such as distance learning, but many behavior modification programs are still the most widely utilized according to the data collected in this study.

The findings of research question three (Aligning Efforts) and four (Planning and Communication) pertained to the literature theme characteristics of students in alternative placements. One of the most important findings of this study was that Allegheny County struggles with supporting their transient at-risk youth with juvenile probation, social services, and other necessary components such as truancy prevention. Student characteristics such as age, grade level completed, and social concerns create challenges for alterative servicers based on

their ability to educate transient youth. Some of these factors contribute to a large transient population of at-risk youth that struggle to reach academic goals and may need to be educated in an alternative school environment. Also, more efforts need to be made to align social and mental health services with schools to provide in-depth support for needy students and families. More communication between sending and receiving schools is another key finding of this study. Curricula, transitions, and record keeping are three important aspects that schools need to share with consistency in order to better support transient students.

5.3   REFLECTION OF IMPLICATIONS OF PRACTICE

As the researcher, I have a unique perspective of this study because I am a building principal of large urban high school in western Pennsylvania. Some of the findings of this study were consistent with my experiences as a practitioner while many others were issues that I had not considered or experienced. I assumed that all high school principals had similar experiences with alternative education, but that was not necessarily the case.

Findings related to the need for coordinating social services was not something that I necessarily felt would be effective based on my experiences. My experience as an educator has lead me to believe that even if services are coordinated, there are too many students who do not receive the necessary supports and services because of overcrowding in programs and lack of resources. I have always worked in an urban environment with students with many unique needs and many parents struggle to access social services because of their lack awareness of what is available. After they are educated about possible supports, commitment is the next important factor. Organizations have struggled to keep their commitments because of large caseloads, lack

of staff, and lack of other resources. This issue relates directly to another finding that I had not considered. The difference in location of the school district in western Pennsylvania played a large role in the type of services that are available, as well as, the depth of services that are offered. Some rural schools have limited access to services due to transportation issues and because programs are often centrally located. Suburban schools have fewer students receiving services, so principals expressed concerns of not having enough programs in a reasonable distance from the school. Findings of this study revealed that schools located outside of Allegheny County receive more support from social services and probation and receive more in-depth interventions for their students. One rural school principal did express concerns that her school did not have access to services because of their location, however most principals felt strongly that Allegheny County has too many schools therefore students to service and they struggle to provide the necessary support.

The participants of this study provided feedback from their experiences and their particular school's successes and challenges with alternative education. Policy implications for improving some of the challenges that alternative education has created for public school districts need immediate attention from policy makers. This section will discuss how educational alternatives help produce more transient high school students and the challenges that several state and federal mandates create as educators attempt to accommodate at-risk youth. Educational alternatives are significant factors for why students are or have become transient. If a student leaves their public school and attends an alternative program by choose or mandate, that decision makes them somewhat transient if that student then returns to their home school at some point in their education.

Transient students are a large obstacle for public school districts to overcome with the emergence of high stakes testing and the need for meeting cohort style graduation requirements. Those transient at-risk students have become even more difficult to follow and transition with the constant media promotion of charter schools and lack of communication from other educational alternatives.

The McKinney Vento Homelessness Act has given the homeless student or family the right to make the decision on where they attend school while they are considered homeless. Most students choose the schools that are furthest away from their shelter or current leaving arrangement. The student is then at a disadvantage because they are unable to access resources such as tutoring or extracurricular activities that can help them develop some sense stability and academic success. School districts must provide transportation and cannot require proof of residency upon enrollment. Also, school districts must use staff and resources without any more finances to track homelessness students and their families to be sure their situation has not changed. No Child Left Behind, IDEA, AEDY regulations and McKinney-Vento Homelessness Act all contribute to more transient students. Examples of challenges created by the policies listed above:

- Emotionally disturbed students do not always get the necessary services because mandates say they must be in the least restrictive environment, which often leads to disruptive behavior.

- School districts must accept almost any student who enrolls as homeless because the justification of that categorization is difficult for districts to prove otherwise. Also, transportation has to be provided by the home school district for that homeless student even if they do not attend school regularly.

- A student must meet the definition of a disruptive youth provided by PDE, but the definition does not include crimes outside of school such as weapon possession, drugs, sexual offenses, or other violent crimes. Those students are placed in the public school environment without restrictions.

- IDEA and the IEP process makes it extremely difficult to expel a student that receives special education services, especially if they are intellectually disabled or emotional disturbed because it is difficult to determine that their negative behavior is not a manifestation of the their disability.

- High stakes testing is necessary for most students with exceptionalities. For example, students who may have attended a charter school or alternative program that does not utilize the Common Core standards will likely struggle with academic achievement because the curriculum is not aligned to the desired outcomes.

There are many other examples that practitioners likely face in the day to day operations of a public high school in order to educate all children and at the same time meet their physical and emotional needs. Public schools do not have the luxury of choosing who attends their schools or which students they are educating. They must differentiate instruction, support special needs, and meet the accountability requirements while at the same time ensuring that all children are receiving a free and equal education.

5.4   RECOMMENDATIONS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

The following recommendations for future research can be utilized if this same study was to be repeated or followed up with additional research:

- The methodology section of this study could be adapted to focus on interviewing as the primary source of data collection. Due to principals' busy schedules, the low response rate to the survey possibly could have been avoided if phone interviews were conducted with entire targeted sample in place of the survey process. All principals were willing to talk freely on the phone and spend more than thirty minutes responding to seven questions. That proved to the researcher that a primary study focused around interviewing would be extremely productive.

- Consider financial repercussions and policies related directly to funding cyber schools and other charter schools. Equality does not exist for funding alternative education program. The tuition of private alternative programs varies, and it is remarkably disproportionate to the cost of educating a child in a public school district. A similar study focused principals' perception of the financial challenges school districts face and resources that are lost in order to support alternative school tuition be a compliment to the findings of this study.

- Consideration for an ethnographic study involving the high school principal's office could contribute to the findings of this study. Tangible examples that highlight daily operations of a principal in an urban setting could add momentum to this study and assist with possible policy changes that could support public high schools.

- Lastly, a new study could include the alternative school principals or leadership so that their perspective could be combined with findings of this study. Both perspectives could offer a well-rounded discussion about improvements to supporting alternative school students and the benefits of educational alternatives.

5.5   CONCLUDING REMARKS

This process began with concerns about meeting the needs of all students whether or not they are attending educational alternatives or their unique educational needs are being met within the public school district. Educational leaders are often forced to accept the mandates and policies created by politicians and policy makers. The findings of this study suggest that consideration needs to be taken on behalf of all schools before mandates are created. Collectively, public and private educational institutions need to work together to meet the unique educational needs of all children and accomplish the goal of creating productive citizens that are prepared to pursue post-secondary education, military, or the work force. Our goals need to shift from competing over students to preparing teenagers to someday become career oriented, taxpayers, voters, and homeowners.

APPENDIX A

LETTER OF INVENTION TO PARTICIPATE IN SURVEY

TO: High School Principal

FROM: Mark P. Holtzman, Doctoral Candidate
           School of Education
           University of Pittsburgh

DATE: 8/30/14

You are being asked to participate in a graduate research study. The purpose of this study is to explore how alternative education programs in Western Pennsylvania are meeting the needs of public high schools with at-risk student populations.

This study was designed to complete the dissertation requirements for the doctoral degree in K-12 administration and leadership. You were selected as a participant for this study because you are a building principal of a high school in Western Pennsylvania with an approximate free and reduced population of 30% or higher.

There is no financial compensation for participating in the study. If you elect to participate in this study, you will be asked to log into the survey system. The system will be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week from August 30, 2014 to September 7, 2014. Also, at the end of the survey you will be asked to participate in a short follow-up phone interview. If you choose to participate please enter your name and email address into the last question.

The researcher expects that it will take approximately 15 minutes to complete the on- line survey. The survey asks for general information about the alternative education programs that your school may utilize and how communication, value, and best practices relate to the effectiveness of the alternative education experience.

The information from this survey will be published in a dissertation. For your protection and to minimize any risk associated with participation in this study, the identities of respondents

will not be tracked. Neither your name, nor your institution's name, nor any other identifying information will appear in the data or the finished manuscript. Only the researcher will have access to this information.

Thank You,

Mark P. Holtzman

mholtzman@mckasd.net

https://qtrial2014.az1.qualtrics.com/SE/?SID=SV_0ct7w07dms5KM4t

APPENDIX B

SURVEY

Utilization of Alternative Programs

1. What type of alternative education programs do you currently have students attending outside of the brick and mortar high school? Select all that apply

    □ Brick and Mortar Cyber schools
    □ Exclusively distance learning Cyber schools
    □ Day Behavior modification
    □ Evening Behavior modification
    □ Other charter schools

2. What type of alternative education programs does your district use?

    □ Internal (district owned and operated)
    □ External (outsourced tuition related programs)

3. Do any of the alternative programs you utilize employ district teachers or administrators?

    □ Yes
    □ No

If yes, which type of program and where is it located (internal or external)?

4. Do any of your alternative programs accept students that require special education services?

    □ Yes
    □ No

5. Does your district pay tuition to educate students in alternative education programs?

　□ Yes
　□ No

Value of Alternative Education Programs

6. What are the discipline infractions that prompt placement of students in alternative education programs? Please Rank Most Common Infractions 1 to 7

　__ Weapons　__General School Misconduct
　__ Drugs　　__ Truancy
　__ Alcohol　　__Fighting
　__ Other

7. Is referring and moving a student to alternative education program a challenging process in your school district?

　□ Yes
　□ No

　If Yes, explain some of the **most important** challenges

8. Rate the average time efficiency of your referral process? **(How long does the process take when a student is assigned to an alternative setting?)**

　□ 1-3 days □ 3-5 days
　□ 5-10 days □ 10 or more days

9. How often do students choose to leave the district for alternative means of education?

　□ Occasionally
　□ Frequently □ Not at All

10. Approximately how many students have you placed in alternative education programs in the past two years?
　Internal　　　　　　　　　　　External
　□ 1-5 □ 11-15　　　　　　　□ 1-5 □ 11-15
　□ 6-10 □ 16 or more　　　　□ 6-10 □ 16 or more

11. How regularly do students return to your high school within the **same year** they are placed?

　□ Occasionally
　□ Frequently □ Not at All

12. Do you have established criteria that students must meet in order to transition back in to your high school?

 □ Yes
 □ No

 If yes, Check the ones that apply. □ Behavioral □ Attendance □ Academic

13. How would you rate your relationship with the leadership of the alternative education program(s) you utilize, for both internal and external?

 Internal   **External**
 □ Excellent □ Very Good   □ Excellent □ Very Good
 □ Good □ Fair □ Poor □**NA**   □ Good □ Fair □ Poor □**NA**

Aligning Efforts

14. Who is responsible for communicating with the alternative education programs in order to place a student or create a plan for a student transitioning back in to your building?
 Select all that apply

 □ Principal □ Assistant Principal
 □ Central Office □ Guidance counselor
 □ other

15. Do the Alternative programs you utilize have curricula that are aligned to the Common Core Standards?

 □ Yes
 □ No
 □ Not Sure

16. Assuming a student graduates from an alternative education school, do they have to meet the same graduation requirements as the sending school graduates?

 □ Yes
 □ No

17. Do you believe that you have sufficient enough quality educational options available to you when you have to refer students who require an alternative education setting?

 □ Yes
 □ No

If No, what additional options would you prefer?

18. Which type of alternative programs have you had the best experience working with and that you prefer sending students?

□ Brick and Mortar Cyber schools □ Evening Behavioral modification
□ District operated program □ Day Behavior modification

Planning and Communication

19. Is a transition plan created for every student that is placed in or that maybe returning from placement?

□ Yes
□ No

20. Rate the communication between your school and any Alternative programs.

□ excellent
□ good
□ average
□ poor

21. Do you have any information that was not addressed in the earlier questions that you would like to include about your alternative education?

22. Would you be interested in a brief follow up interview? Please provide Name and Email Address.

APPENDIX C

EMAIL

From: Holtzman, Mark MHoltzman@mckasd.net

Date: Mon, 15 Sep 2014 12:23:17

To: Principals

Subject: Brief Interview request

I really appreciate that you volunteered to participate in a brief phone interview about alternative education. It is only about 6 primary questions with a few follow-ups. I know everyone is extremely busy, but I only need about 15 minutes of your time. Please provide a **phone number** and a **time frame** when it is ok to contact you. We can talk during the school day or in the evening…whatever works for you. I was hoping to make contact with you tomorrow (Tuesday) or Wednesday, September 17th. Thanks Mark

Mark P. Holtzman
Principal
McKeesport Area High School
1960 Eden Park Blvd.
Phone (412)664-3650
Fax (412)664-3787

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