

BEST PRACTICES FOR STUDENT SUCCESS IN AN ALTERNATIVE MIDDLE  
SCHOOL SETTING FROM A STUDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

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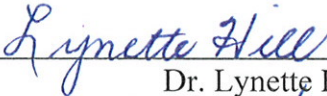
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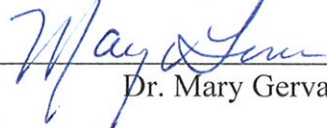
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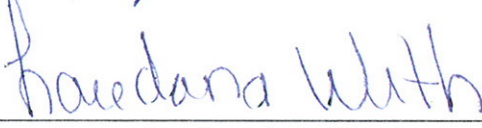
AUTHORIZATION TO SUBMIT DISSERTATION


This dissertation of Jim R. Brown, submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education with a major in Educational Leadership and titled "Best Practices for Student Success in an Alternative Middle School Setting From a Student's Perspective," has been reviewed in final form. Permission, as indicated by the signatures and dates given below, is now granted to submit final copies.


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## DEDICATION

This study is dedicated to all the middle school students in alternative education programs. All of you deserve recognition for your courage, skills, and abilities as you continue down the road to success. Commit to Graduate! C2G!

“Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the laws my servant Moses gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go” (Joshua 1:7).

## ABSTRACT

Attrition among students costs individuals, institutions, and communities. As a result, alternative schools are growing rapidly. In 2010, over half a million students were enrolled in public alternative schools in the nation (Carver, Lewis, & Tice, 2010). Alternative programs offered at secondary, middle, and elementary schools exhibiting a variety of practices, structures, and philosophies combat this epidemic of attrition. This mixed study investigates best practices in an alternative middle school setting from a student's perspective. Uncovered exemplars could allow administrators to implement strategies best suited to meet alternative middle school students' needs. Qualitative data consisted of two rounds of interviews with 10 participants. Quantifiable data collected included Idaho Standard Achievement Test scores (ISAT), grade point averages (GPAs), and attendance records prior to attending Span Academy and after completion of the program. Results from the ISAT scores revealed eight to 13 points of growth, equivalent to two to three years of growth. GPAs on a 4-point scale improved 1.5 points in language and 1.3 points in math. Students who achieved Level 5 and transitioned had 26 fewer absences while attending Span Academy than their previous year in school. In accordance to research protocol, two questions were rephrased to eliminate ambiguity and retain the integrity of student responses. Finally, it also became apparent that students attending alternative programs carry a stigma. This understanding provided an awareness that resulted in changed practices and procedures at Span Academy. Additionally, this research revealed that alternative middle schools, like Span Academy, contrary to the original design as a transition school, are better served as a 2-year intervention program, where the research revealed few students transitioned as of 2009 to

present, and most preferred to remain at Span Academy through their eighth-grade year.

Accordingly, Span Academy redesigned its program from a typical transition school to a comprehensive 2-year intervention program. Overwhelmingly, the student responses, supported by the quantifiable data, resulted in two overarching themes of accountability and relationship.

The results from this research not only lend to best practices in an alternative middle school environment, but provide answers and strategies to best assist students in a traditional setting as well.



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## **Chapter I**

### **Introduction**

Attrition at almost every grade level has become a significant problem in U.S. public schools. Considerable research regarding attrition in U.S. public schools has taken place over the past several years with concerning results. In 2006, 3.5 million youth were not enrolled in school, lacked a high school diploma, and were not employed (Aron, 2006). As recently as 2010, statistics have confirmed a young person drops out of school every 26 seconds, an estimated 7,000-plus students drop out of school every day, and 1.2 million students fail to graduate from high school each year.

Sociologists, economists, and education researchers have asked, “Why are so many students dropping out of school?” Comprehensive research has elicited several reasons for these phenomena, including student disengagement and subsequent boredom, irrelevant content, poor relationships with teachers and peers, lack of personal effort, attendance requirements, and discipline policies or practices, along with antisocial behaviors, which lead to frequent discipline referrals and suspensions (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Several researchers confirmed a mismatch between the learner and the learning system, suggesting traditional public schools currently fail to meet the needs of a specifically defined (at-risk) group of students (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Raywid 2001).

In response to these and other concerns, educational reform measures have developed alternatives to traditional classroom teaching and learning (Atkins, Bullis, & Todis, 2005). Accordingly, alternative schools have taken on a multitude of philosophies ranging from “Last-Chance Schools” to “Freedom Schools.”

This mixed study investigated the experiences and compiled statistics among students who successfully transitioned from Span Academy, an alternative middle school located in southern Idaho. The study parameters included analysis of the following student data: Idaho Standard Achievement Test (ISAT) scores, grade point averages (GPAs), attendance, and grade levels prior to entering and after leaving Span Academy.

### **Statement of the Problem**

Too many students fail to meet their educational goals and drop out of school. In response, educational reform measures have included alternatives to traditional classroom teaching and learning protocols (Atkins, Bullis, & Todis, 2005). As more students choose and are steered toward participation in alternative education routes, an ongoing need for continued research to address increased attrition and best practices for matriculation within alternative schools, particularly alternative middle school settings, has become apparent. The research herein addresses these concerns as specifically related to an alternative middle school setting.

### **Background**

Alternative schools have existed since the early 1900s. The majority of these schools have been characterized by one, several, or a combination of the following parameters: parent, student, and teacher choice; autonomy in learning and pace; noncompetitive evaluation processes; and a child-centered approach to instruction and learning (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002). Administrators, teachers, and parents can refer students to alternative schools if the students appear to be at risk of educational failure as reflected in poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, or suspension.

Raywid (1994), Cable, Plucker, and Spradin (2009) classified contemporary alternative schools into three types. Type I alternatives include popular schools of choice. Type II

alternatives place students in an alternative school, usually as a last-chance school prior to expulsion, last-chance meaning success at the alternative school is the final step to permanent expulsion from public schools located in the district. Type III alternatives provide social or emotional remediation or rehabilitation. Alternative educational programs vary as much as the diverse populations they serve (Tobin & Sprague, 1999).

Span Academy operates as a Type I alternative school, where enrollment is optional, meaning the student can elect to enroll if he or she meets the criteria, and if parents and the student support and adhere to the vision, mission, and school's telos. Similar to Gilson (2006), Span Academy rests upon the premise that all students can succeed and graduate. To facilitate this, schools must emphasize objective structural constraints, which make all effective schools productive and successful. These structural constraints include mobilizing caring people who build a community of learners, as well as those same committed, involved people facilitating an environment where effective teaching and learning is commonplace (Gilson, 2006).

Students are required to wear a school uniform, consisting of a specifically designed polo shirt and blue or black jeans with a brown or black belt. Class sizes are limited to 16 students or fewer students, and every classroom is staffed with a teacher and paraprofessional. The core curriculum consists of math, language, reading, and science course work where adjustments have been made to the instructional methods, assessment practices, and academic demands to facilitate meeting the unconventional needs of alternative middle school students (Weir, 1996).

General electives are offered along with outreach, recovery, after-school tutoring, weekly progress reports, and a counseling class. In addition, student-led parent-teacher conferences take place quarterly, and a levels (advancement) system provides motivation, recognition, and progress.



Recovery classes occur approximately one and a half hours every other Friday. The classes provide support for students who require additional assistance in order to master concepts or complete missing work. Students are assigned to classrooms by their advisory teacher where they receive specific help in the areas needed. Enrichment and extended activities are offered to those students who excel and are gifted. Thus, recovery classes empower those who fall behind to catch up and to master current concepts, while offering advanced work and activities for gifted students.

Outreach or service-learning projects take place monthly throughout the school year and on Fridays from 1:00 p.m. to 2:40 p.m. The students' input, dialogue, and contributions drive the activities, their design, and full implementation. The voluntary acts or projects provide avenues for students to give back to the community. Activities have included, but are not limited to, holding free car washes, painting classrooms, walking the dogs at the animal shelter, stocking shelves for the local Habitat for Humanity, organizing and preparing clothes for display and sale at Deseret Industries, reading stories to elementary students, and writing letters to our U.S. armed forces' veterans. Students also clean the lunchroom and maintain their individual working area and common areas to keep the school looking neat, clean, and safe.

Weekly progress reports are simplified versions of report cards that are sent home every Wednesday with each student. These reports inform parents about current grades, missing assignments, and notices about big projects. Each student must return the progress report with a parent-guardian signature to confirm a parent has reviewed the report and is aware of their child's progress or incomplete and missing work.

A counseling class is offered weekly where students learn life skills, social skills, and coping skills related to peer pressure, undue stress, bullying, and other issues that arise (Shirley,



Alternative Secondary Programs (Section 33-1002; 33-1002C; 33-1002F, Idaho Code) mandate that an Idaho student must meet the criteria for eligibility as an at-risk youth to attend an alternative program. An at-risk youth includes any secondary student in grades 7 through 12 who meets any three of the following criteria in subsections (a) through (f) or any one of the criteria in subsections (g) through (m):

- a. has repeated at least one grade;
- b. has absenteeism greater than 10% during the preceding semester;
- c. has an overall GPA that is less than 1.5 prior to enrolling in an alternative secondary program;
- d. has failed one or more academic subjects;
- e. is two or more semester credits per year behind the rate required to graduate;
- f. is limited English proficient and has not been in a program more than three years;
- g. has substance abuse behavior;
- h. is pregnant or a parent;
- i. is an emancipated youth;
- j. is a previous dropout;
- k. has serious personal, emotional, or medical problems;
- l. is a court or agency referral; and/or
- m. has been recommended by the school district as determined by locally developed criteria for disruptive student behavior.

Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) acknowledged three measurable factors that account for the success of alternative schools. First, alternative schools generate and sustain community; second, alternatives make learning engaging; and, finally, alternatives provide the

necessary organization and structure required to sustain the first two factors. The design basis for alternative education models incorporates the creation of an environment that is conducive to learning and that meets the needs of the student (Quinn & Poirier, 2006; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006). Lange and Sletten (2002) and Van Acker (2007) concurred that this practice necessitates the development of a classroom with low student–teacher ratio, individualized instruction, and varied and noncompetitive assessments.

Mahar (2001) and Van Acker (2007) suggested that what happens outside the classroom directly affects adolescent literacy inside the classroom. Coinciding with the opinion of the researcher who is conducting this study, the finding confirmed the intrinsic value of building relationships between student and teacher or between student and staff— both of which would more likely blossom in a smaller alternative setting (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Sagor (2002) presented findings related to what motivates students to learn. The acronym, CBUPO, which incorporates the need to feel competent, the need to belong, the need to feel useful, the need to feel potent, and the need to feel optimistic, provides the focus. Miller, Fitch, and Marshall (2003) confirmed the importance of alternative school educators to help students develop a greater perception of control and an increased understanding that their success or failure results from their own actions as opposed to fate or chance.

Price, Martin, and Robertson (2010) advocated that alternative school education administrators require the skill sets of encouragement, inquiry, decisiveness, forward progress, and networking. These researchers asserted that principal behaviors include demonstrating integrity, creating a positive school culture, providing opportunities for teachers to plan, team, and work together, and incorporating shared leadership and decision making to enhance the staff's desire and willingness to focus energy on achieving educational excellence (Edmunds &

Glennie, 2006; Greenlee & Brown, 2009). Oftentimes, effective alternative schools develop their organizations around a particular principle or theme, such as personalized education, college preparation, professional technical, behavior and social skills, community of learners, credit recovery, dropout prevention, or service learning (Duke, 2004; Elmore, 2003; Green & Cypress, 2009; Hurwitz, 2007; Senese & Arnold, 2010).

Duke and Griesdorn (1999) concurred that the following structural questions require revisiting on a regular basis to revamp and improve alternative school programs, staff, and facilities: How should alternative schools be organized for instruction? How should the learning environment be arranged and discipline handled? Should students be permanently placed in alternative schools? Similarly, alternative education programs must determine approaches for linking their classrooms and instructional experiences to the community to help foster success (Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Raywid, 2001; Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011).

### **Research Questions or Hypotheses**

This study investigated the following research questions.

1. What were the experiences, successes, and struggles of students who successfully transitioned from the Span Academy to another school in the district?
2. What implemented practices led students to achieve Level 5 and to complete Span Academy's program?
3. What feedback did the students who attended Span Academy offer to administrators in an alternative middle school setting based on their personal experiences?
4. What did the data indicate regarding attendance, GPA, and ISAT scores prior to entering and after completing Span Academy?

## Description of Terms

The following overview defines important terms within this dissertation:

**Advisory class.** A homeroom shortened period designed to build camaraderie and rapport with students. During this time, a program titled “Why Try?” is implemented. See Why Try definition below.

**Alternative education.** A program that is different and separate from a regular classroom.

**Attrition.** Those students who withdraw from or drop out of school before completing the mandated course work necessary to graduate from high school. Dropout is used synonymously in this study.

**Confederate.** An education associate working with an identified individual to complete a task or achieve a desired goal.

**End of Course (EOC).** A summative test administered at the conclusion of each grading period.

**Idaho Standard Achievement Test (ISAT).** A standardized test that all Idaho school districts receiving state funds must implement in grades 3 through 12. Students must pass this test by grade 12 in order to fulfill requirements for graduation.

**Levels.** An advancement system utilized to track individual progress and to provide feedback to students, teachers, and parents on a regular basis. Each level within the system consists of designated requirements related to attendance, behavior, academics, outreach, and counseling sessions. The levels range from entry Level 1 to completion or matriculation, Level 5. Students who achieve Level 5 generally transition back to a traditional middle or high school in the school district.

**Matriculation.** A student is approved for a course or grade level of further education after meeting the academic standard required.

**Milepost.** An interactive electronic student database warehouse software that enables all student data, including performance indicators, benchmarks, accommodations, interventions, and plans, along with student, parent, and district accountability measures.

**Mixed study.** A study that incorporates both qualitative and quantitative research practices.

**Outreach program.** Voluntary service-learning projects wherein students participate and help plan project activities; used synonymously with service learning. A few examples include volunteering at the animal shelter, Habitat for Humanity, or Deseret Industries.

**Paraprofessional.** A paid teacher–assistant position, where an individual has been hired to assist a teacher in the classroom; often associated with the term teacher’s aide.

**Progress report.** A written statement or report indicative of an individual student’s completed work, accomplished tasks, or conversely, lack of completion.

**Recovery.** A weekly scheduled work time provided for students to make up missing work or to redo unsatisfactory work. Recovery is scheduled every other Friday from 1:00 p.m. to 2:40 p.m., wherein students receive additional help in their core classes for either a failing grade or missing work.

**Retention.** Students who do not matriculate or who are held back to repeat the same grade.

**School connectedness.** The individual and corporate belief of students that the adults and their peers in a given school care about their learning and are concerned about each of them as individuals.

**Span Academy.** A public, alternative middle school serving grades 7 and 8 and located in southern Idaho. All of this study's subjects attended Span Academy.

**Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS).** A statistical software package that is among the most widely used programs for statistical analysis in the social science market. Health researchers, survey companies, government researchers, education researchers, and marketing organizations frequently use this program.

**Successful student.** A student who has achieved Level 5 by maintaining a 95% attendance rate, received one or fewer write-ups for the quarter, sustained a C average in all course work, and participated in all outreach and counseling sessions, resulting in the successful transition to a traditional school in the district and is currently passing courses and earning credit toward graduation.

**Transition.** Changing schools at the end of the quarter, semester, or school year.

**Why Try.** A strength-based approach to help youth overcome their challenges and improve outcomes in the areas of truancy, behavior, and academics. Youth learn social and emotional principles through a series of 10 picture themes that teach a discrete principle. Program descriptors include academic improvement, attendance–truancy, counseling–advisories, literacy development, study skills, substance abuse, and life skills training. This game-plan journal helps students make positive changes and is implemented during advisory class.

### **Significance of the Study**

This study increased administrative understanding of best practices from a student's perspective in an alternative middle school setting. Additionally, the questions asked endeavored to identify best practices already implemented and performed at Span Academy, as well as those



recommended for implementation in the future. Most importantly, the study offered recommendations and results of best practices to alternative middle school administrators.

Additionally, the study provided an opportunity for alternative middle school students to share their perceptions regarding what they valued, what led to their successes, and their suggestions for consideration in an alternative middle school program. Furthermore, the study added to the research in best practices and strategies in fostering success at alternative middle schools. The researcher anticipates publishing this study in order that colleagues, peers, and district office administrative team members can benefit from its results and recommendations. The comprehensive findings can also assist those interested in alternative education, including the academic community, such as the Idaho Middle Level Association and the Idaho Association of Secondary Principals, as well as the business community and parents.

### **Overview of Research Methods**

This mixed study incorporated two semistructured interviews and quantifiable research data, including ISAT scores, attendance records, and GPAs prior to attending Span Academy and after successfully completing Span Academy's program. The interviews were coded and grouped according to themes. The themes were then integrated based on either comprehensive sharing or specific limited sharing. Data collection concluded with the final participant and after the transcripts revealed no new themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). Member checking occurred with each participant to confirm that the final statement reflected his or her experience with the phenomena (Willig, 2007).

The first of four generalized questions the researcher posed focused on participants' experiences while attending Span Academy. This question determined the value and benefit, from a student's perspective, of attending an alternative middle school, specifically, Span

Academy. The data collected consisted of a compilation of answers to 20 questions that were, in turn, coded, analyzed, and organized into themes.

Question 2 requested feedback related to best practices from students' perspectives—specifically, those who achieved Level 5, and who successfully transitioned to another school in the district. Question 2 incorporated a discussion regarding all of the strategies and programs offered at Span Academy, as well as the respondents' transitions to and from Span Academy. Resulting data from the two sessions of interview questions totaling 90 minutes were then coded, analyzed, and placed into themes.

Question 3 focused on students' feedback, suggestions, comments, likes, and dislikes regarding Span Academy. This data, too, was collected during interview sessions and coded, analyzed, and grouped into themes.

Question 4, the quantitative portion of the study, pertained to all students who attended the Span Academy, achieved Level 5, and successfully transitioned to another school in the district from 2009 to 2012. The data consisted of grade levels, current placements, comparative attendance records, ISAT scores, and GPAs of 17 students prior to entering Span Academy and after completing the program. The predata and postdata were placed into SPSS that utilized a *t*-test to determine whether a significant difference resulted.

The instrumentation used in this mixed study included interviews, echo smartpen recordings, and SPSS. All interviews were audio taped, transcribed, coded, and grouped into themes. This process continued until no new themes arose. Former Span Academy students from 2009 to 2012, who ranged from 14 to 18 years old, achieved Level 5, transitioned to and were currently enrolled in one of the schools in the district and earning credit toward graduation, met the established criteria to participate in this study.

## **Chapter II**

### **The Literature Review**

#### **Introduction**

Alternative schools are growing rapidly due to the increased number of failing, dropping out, or struggling students. According to Carver, Lewis, and Tice (2010), 645,500 students are enrolled in public alternative schools in the nation. Programs initiated at the secondary, middle, and elementary school levels manifest a variety of practices, structures, and philosophies. Some remove the problem or the difficult students from the traditional schools; others, more academically or socially proactive, work to meet all students' needs (Raywid, 1994). Unfortunately, many still operate with punitive enrollment practices, while adhering to the federal No Child Left Behind mandate (Raywid, 1994).

Ongoing research must take place to uncover beneficial practices most effective in creating a climate in which all alternative middle school students can pursue their educational goals and plans and where educators foster a climate conducive to educational success. The Span Academy encapsulates this concept in its motto, "Commit 2 Graduate (C2G)."

#### **Alternative Schools Historical Perspective**

Statutorily, S.-115.28(7) (e), Wisconsin Statutes defines an alternative education program as "an instructional program approved by the school board that utilizes successful alternative or adaptive school structures and teaching techniques and that is incorporated into existing, traditional classrooms, or regularly scheduled curricular programs, or that is offered in place of regularly scheduled curricular programs." Alternative education does not include a private school or a home-based private educational program (Aron, 2003).

Foley and Pang (2006) referred to an instructional program that was different and separate from regular classroom instruction. Lange and Sletten (2002) first described the alternative movement as “Freedom Schools” or “Open Schools” that incorporated some of the following practices: parent, student, and teacher choice; autonomy in learning and pace; noncompetitive evaluation; and a child-centered approach.

Several types emerged with representative names for these nascent schools. For example, “Schools Without Walls” emphasizes community-based learning as one type of program. These schools advocate for teaching students to apply what they learned in the classroom to real-world problems outside of school (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

“Schools Within a School” restructures large high schools into smaller communities of learning. One school created a separate and specific ninth-grade-only wing to provide the needed support and guidance new matriculating students require.

“Multicultural Schools” integrate culture and ethnicity into their curricula. “Continuation Schools” create learning centers intended to meet particular student needs with special resources. “Fundamental Schools” incorporate a back-to-basics approach focused on core subject content for student success, and “Magnet Schools” address the desire for racial integration (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Tobin and Sprague (1999) noted that alternative education program models vary as much as the diverse populations they serve.

Raywid (1994) and Cable, Plucker, and Spradin (2009) classified contemporary alternative schools into three different types. Type I alternatives include the popular schools of choice. While giving support and guidance, along with receiving input from their children, parents oftentimes choose the Type I alternative school as the pathway to their child’s success.

Type II alternatives include last-chance schools where students attend prior to expulsion. Last-chance schools are final options offered regularly by a district for students with chronic behavioral issues. Typically, Type II programs focus on behavior modification with little attention to curriculum and/or pedagogy.

Type III alternatives focus on students who require either social or emotional remediation, rehabilitation, or both. Type III schools provide special support for students with specific needs, generally students with an emotionally disturbed diagnosis on Individual Education Plans.

Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) argued that another reason for alternative schools involves the socioemotional disconnect or mismatch between the structure and expectations of schools and the social, cultural, and economic backgrounds of students. In other words, schools are not meeting a particular group of students' socioeconomic needs (Cable, Plucker, & Spradin, 2009). Although educators knew the problem had worsened, the most valid statistics revealed that in 2006, 3.5 million youth were not enrolled in school, lacked a high school diploma, and were not employed (Aron, 2006).

Deschenes, Cuban, and Tyack (2001) acknowledged three factors that account for the success of alternative schools, including the supposition that alternative schools generate and sustain community, make learning engaging, and provide necessary organization and structure required to sustain the first two. The design basis for alternative education models results in the creation of an environment that is conducive to learning and meets the needs of the student (Quinn & Poirier, 2006; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006).

Lange and Sletten (2002) and Van Acker (2007) further explained that this practice necessitates the development of a classroom that incorporates the following: low student–teacher

ratio, individualized instruction, and varied and noncompetitive assessments. In essence, the students do not compete against one another but rather work toward a personal goal. Tobin and Sprague (2000) suggested developing a climate of student ownership, which includes studies relevant to student interests, flexibility, and school pride as positive predictors of success.

### **Students' Perspectives**

Britt (2011) studied a group of at-risk students who did not view themselves as at risk, bad, or future dropouts. Instead, they described themselves as active, positive, smart, and unique individuals. The students did, however, struggle to reconcile their personalities with the rigid rules and conformity expected of them at school and believed teachers misread their behaviors as insubordination. These students, on the other hand, viewed their behavior as expressions of self.

The obvious self-serving representations of these students' perceptions did not negate the actual need for educators to find a workable alternative to traditional education practices. Accordingly, from the students' perspectives, the authority figures' summation of their individual and collective behaviors created a negative cycle of suspensions, expulsions, and disconnects from the school (Flanagan, 2007). Negative consequences, such as failure of a course, retention, unfair treatment, or the belief that one is being ignored, became leading causes for students opting to drop out of school (CSG Justice Center, 2011; Flanagan, 2007).

Mahar (2001) and Van Acker (2007) argued that adolescent literacy in the classroom directly affects what happens outside the classroom. Collective researcher opinion confirms the intrinsic value in building relationships between a student and teacher or a student and staff, which more likely blossoms in a smaller alternative setting (Blumm, 2005; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Miller, Fitch, and Marshall (2003) corroborated the importance of educators in alternative schools in helping students develop a greater perception of control and understanding that their individual successes or failures result from their own actions as opposed to a result of fate or chance. McNulty and Roseboro (2009) identified several reasons why punitive enrollment practices appear detrimental. First, students perceive themselves as abnormal and generally adopt a stigmatized identity; second, they sense the reinforcement of the stigma in the collective engagement of others who share the stigma.

Several studies focused on gaining students' perspectives on differences between alternative and traditional educational settings (Lagana-Riordan et al., 2011; Lehr & Lange, 2003; Owens & Konkol, 2004; Rieg, 2007). Results confirmed that students experienced the greatest comfort in an alternative setting, primarily due to smaller class sizes, maintenance of personal connections with teachers, and opportunities to remain in one classroom for all academic subjects, which fostered comfort and stability, familiarity with classmates, self-paced work, and feelings of inclusion, regardless of a disability. San Antonio, Marcell, Ticken, and Wiener (2011) suggested helping students to navigate and build connections and to encourage stimulation of a sense of community and belonging in order to make for a smooth transition and lessen anxiety.

Weissman (2010) evaluated student perspectives regarding school suspensions and how placement in an alternative school affects personal identity, educational expectation, and future aspiration. The study echoed the findings of other researchers and argued that placement in an alternative school actualized several identity notions among alternative school students. Students believed that once they had attended an alternative program, the mainstream schools did not

want them to return; such students felt “marked” after they returned. They also believed they would be subject to high levels of scrutiny and would easily be suspended again.

Students were more concerned about having to acclimate to a new school than about their reputations. Many believed that their education would be undermined in an alternative educational setting, and most were cognizant of the fact that the curriculum in alternative schools seemed weaker than in regular schools. Several believed that their teachers, principals, school police, and other authority figures viewed them as “bad children,” “troubled children,” “worthless,” or “nothing.”

Most of these students also described a good teacher as one who “gave you chances” and “was helpful.” They noted how a really good teacher verified that the students understood a concept. Students agreed, in their estimation, that a good teacher asked, “Do you guys understand this?” A good teacher was someone who willingly took time after school, at the beginning of the day, or perhaps on breaks to help answer questions (Weissman, 2010).

Listening to students through well-designed student surveys helps teachers improve their teaching practices (Phillips, 2013). Evaluation systems combine in-class observations, student learning gains, peer coaching, and, increasingly, student perception surveys (Phillips, 2013). This practice makes perfect sense, especially when considering the vast number of hours students spend with teachers versus an administrator. Four guidelines for creating and using student perception surveys as part of a formal feedback evaluation system include the following: measure what matters, ensure accuracy, ensure reliability, and support improvement. Effective surveys focus on what teachers do, provide accuracy, and assure the responses are attributed to the correct teacher. Finally, based on the results, access to professional development resources and training based on areas in need of improvement are critical to teacher effectiveness.



Sagor (2002) presented findings regarding what motivates students to learn. His research focused on the acronym CBUPO, which incorporated the need to feel competent, the need to belong, the need to feel useful, the need to feel potent, and the need to feel optimistic. According to Atkins, Hohnstein, and Roche (2008), students entering an alternative or charter school reported feeling better about themselves, appeared more concerned about grooming, felt more accepted and more likely to lead, made good friends, and became more involved in their community since beginning their attendance at an alternative or charter school. This sense of community involvement echoed previous research (Poyrazli, Ferrer-Wreder, Meister, Forthun, Coatsworth, & Grahame, 2008).

### **Dropout Prevention**

According to Payne and Edwards (2010), a young person drops out of school every 26 seconds. Siergrist, Drawdy, Leech, Gibson, Stelzer, and Pate (2010) estimated that over 7,000 students drop out of school every day, and over a million students fail to graduate from high school each year. Up to 49% of ninth-grade students in cities with the highest dropout rates repeat ninth grade, and only 10% to 15% of those repeaters go on to graduate (Balfanz & Legters, 2006).

In response to the question, “Why are so many students dropping out of school?” Johnson (2007), Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) identified the following as reasons for dropping out of school: boredom, irrelevant content, poor relationships with teachers and peers, lack of a sense of belonging, lack of personal effort, attendance requirements, and discipline policies and practices. These along with antisocial behaviors lead to frequent discipline referrals and suspensions. Therefore, in response to these and other concerns, educational reform measures have included alternatives to traditional classroom teaching and learning (Atkins, Bullis, & Todis, 2005).

Miller, Fitch, and Marshall (2003) confirmed the importance of educators in alternative schools to help students develop a greater perception of control and to understand that students' success or failure results from their own actions as opposed to resulting from fate or chance. Again, this literature validated the notion that educators need to help students learn to accept and take responsibility for their individual successes and failures.

Payne (2013) noted that when discipline issues turn to emotional issues, it is fruitless for educators to presume they can engage in a disciplinary discussion about behavior and learning without talking about emotion. Payne suggested that, as a tool of engagement, teachers recall a former teacher they had in school and did not like. Chances are that a dislike for the teacher carried over to a dislike for the subject; this is just as true for current students. Students, who for any number of reasons do not care for a subject more than likely do not work to their potential. It is a commonplace reality that emotion is links to practical learning (Payne, 2013).

Payne (2013) also suggested that emotion correlates to safety and belonging. Perceptions of both safety and belonging can become jeopardized by the "toxic" triangle. This triangle, which consists of victim, bully, and rescuer, illustrates a lack of boundaries, wherein middle school students attempt to find their individual and collective places. Undefined boundaries create a threat to their safety and belonging. The first step to keeping the triangle at bay involves making staff, students, and parents aware of boundary problems.

Recommendations include avoiding "why" questions and starting with "how, when, where, what, and to what extent" questions to generate more helpful, less threatening responses. Research confirms addressing emotional issues at the heart of individual problems leads to more effective discipline. Concurrently, students will learn more, and school will be a safer place for all learners (Payne, 2013).

Kleiner, Porph, and Farris (2002) noted that schools generally refer to alternative schools if the students are at risk of educational failure due to poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, or suspension. Kleiner, Porph, and Farris (2002) indicated that alternative programs offered across the nation included 92% at the high school level, 67% at the middle school level, and 21% at the elementary school level. In addition, 54% of districts with alternative schools and programs for at-risk students have reported that within the last three years some districts' demand for enrollment has exceeded capacity. Consequently, the number of alternative programs has increased dramatically over the last two decades (Kleiner, Porph, & Farris, 2002). Those located in urban neighborhoods with communities of low socioeconomic status have expanded into suburban and, to a lesser extent, rural settings (Kleiner, Porph, & Farris, 2002). Additionally, several states have initiated legislation focused on alternative education settings (Lehr, 2004).

According to Unruh, Bullis, Todis, Waintrup, and Atkins (2007), alternative education programs have dramatically increased over the last two decades, consistent with the findings of Kleiner, Porph, and Farris (2002). Curriculum utilized by the majority of alternative schools focus on math, science, and language arts. In addition, 80% provides work experience and over 50% offer service-learning options.

Four broad themes emerged as a result of the Unruh et al. (2007) study. First, small student-to-staff ratios allow for the development of positive and appropriate mentoring relationships. Second, flexible curriculum and instruction create a diverse academic setting, which often accommodate multiple levels of student achievement. Third, establishment of diverse goals extend beyond academic progress to include behavioral, social, life, and adult skills. Fourth, an alternative education setting carries a stigma for students, which can be even greater if the students, too, attend special education. Within the alternative education setting, this

stigma is frequently reversed (Atkins, Hohnstein, & Roche, 2008; Unruh, Bullis, Todis, Waintrup, & Atkins, 2007).

Shah (2012) described the “Communities in School” model places within the school a staff member who identifies students at risk of dropping out, and then provides volunteers to address specific academic and social needs through tutoring, counseling, health services, and college visits. The incorporation of Shah’s model revealed a strong impact on reducing dropout rates, improving attendance among ninth graders, reducing disciplinary referrals and out-of-school suspensions, and improving state assessments in math slightly.

Protheroe (2007) provided a number of strategies proven to help struggling students succeed without having to repeat a grade or even worse, drop out of school. Those strategies include aligning instruction with standards, “early warning” assessments, multiage grouping, accelerated learning, extended learning time after school and during summer school, increasing professional development for teachers working with low-performing students, and improving children’s preschool experience (Protheroe, 2007). Implementing a coherent, standards-based instructional program has proven effective in educating low-income student populations. Intervention teams study data about individual students and develop a plan of action to catch students before they fail. These early warning assessment teams may include a current teacher, former teacher, or special education teacher.

In the primary grades, some schools are adopting multiage classrooms, where students of different ages and abilities are grouped together, which enables students to make continuous progress as opposed to being promoted once per year. Interventions that accelerate learning consist of providing a “double dose” of periods for reading and/or math. An approach taken by

many districts involves supplemental instructional time through after-school and summer school programs.

Professional development, especially for new teachers working in high-poverty student populations, has proven beneficial. Specific training suggestions include Ruby Payne's framework for understanding poverty, as well as training in differentiated instruction. Finally, clear indications reveal how participation in preschool provides the experiences and skills necessary for kindergarten readiness.

Tobin and Sprague (2000) noted school records not only provide an effective tool for identifying at-risk students who would benefit from an alternative setting but also offer warning signs in relation to more serious problems among such students. These researchers also postulated about how the benefits of dropout prevention would exceed the costs by a ratio of 9:1. Currently the district spends approximately \$5,000 annually to educate a student as opposed to \$19,400 annually to incarcerate juveniles. The following recommended alternative education strategies have proven effective in reducing violence in the school and community: low ratio of students to teachers, high-structured classrooms with effective behavioral classroom management, positive rather than punitive emphasis on behavior management, adult mentors at school, individualized behavioral interventions based on functional behavior assessment, social skills instruction, high-quality academic instruction, and active parental involvement (Tobin & Sprague, 2000).

Brownstein (2010) suggested that implementing Positive Behavior Supports, an evidence-based, data-driven approach proven to reduce disciplinary incidents, increases the sense of safety at a given school and improves attendance rates and academic outcomes by continual teaching, modeling, and rewarding positive student behavior. Brownstein (2010) argued that

Positive Behavior Supports is only part of the solution, and alternatives to suspensions and expulsions must be considered.

Effective alternative strategies to suspensions include behavior contracts that spell out expected behaviors, consequences for infractions, and incentives for appropriate behavior. Additional considerations include community service, after-school detention, loss of privileges, and “Check and Connect.” Check and Connect requires students to meet with a designated staff member several times per week (Brownstein, 2010).

### **Leadership in Alternative Schools**

Elmore (2003) presented the following story consisting of an interview with a high school social studies teacher to emphasize a point:

Researcher: So what do you think of block scheduling?

Teacher: It’s the best thing that’s ever happened in my teaching career.

Researcher: Why?

Teacher: Now we can show the whole movie (p. 76).

Structural change is not the alternative school panacea. This dialogue captures Elmore’s take on structural change and how instructional leaders need to know and model required skills, including knowledge about performance, knowledge about development in content areas, and knowledge about the improvement of instruction (Elmore, 2003).

Duke (2004) suggested hiring turnaround principals, who implement diverse strategies, including taming the wildest students, mandating home visits, setting goals and means of achievement, implementing comprehensive teacher training, and applying good old-fashioned common sense and discerning wisdom. Concurrently, turnaround principals help staff members to confront their personal beliefs about teaching and learning, to assess and refine their

instructional skills, to increase instructional time for struggling students, to improve grouping of students for instruction, to establish and sustain orderly learning environments, and to use various sources of data to monitor student progress on a continuing basis (CSG Justice Center, 2011; Duke, 2004). A turnaround principal is similar to Johnson's turning-school-around model and involves taking steps to ensure successful collaborative leadership. Those steps initially include identifying the leaders and establishing the ground rules for collaboration. Additionally, the principal must set both short-term and long-term goals; include others, such as building leadership team in the decision-making process; make decisions based on the data and ongoing needs assessment; and allow the data to drive the decisions of the leadership team. Finally, establish and facilitate collaboration among the teachers to improve instruction and most important, communication (Johnson, 2011).

Anael Alston, a new principal, had one directive: improve student achievement to keep Robert M. Finley Middle School from being taken over by the state (Hartzman & Mero, 2011). His tenure began by restoring order and building community outreach through holding programs in community centers and churches with the goal of building relationships. He held weekly group meetings with some of the most disruptive students in the school. He endeavored for the students to get to know caring adults and for the adults to get to know the students. A sense of accountability ensued from these efforts. Professional development focused on classroom practices, including differentiated instruction, teaching for understanding, understanding by design, and inquiry-based instruction. A school-wide study skills system was implemented along with a curriculum that utilized project-based outcomes. Anael Alston recommended the following proactive steps to help move a school forward or turn it around: meet with struggling students before problems begin, establish clear outcomes with acceptable evidence practices to

analyze the data, reflect on professional practice and make adjustments, hire the best staff development presenters and attend the training, insist students walk on the right side of hallways during passing, require all adults to monitor hallway during passing, work with people and resources in the community, and continue to be a learner (Hartzman & Mero, 2011).

Varlas (2013) asserted that the turnover rate for teachers in the United States for most districts falls close to 20%. The National Commission on Teaching and America's Future estimates that the national cost of public school teacher turnover costs over \$7.3 billion a year. Tim Daly, president of The New Teacher Project, a nonprofit organization focused on effective teaching, stated, "The real teacher crisis is a failure to retain the right teachers" (p. 2). The New Teacher Project recognizes smart retention practices, which include raising overall teaching conditions and expectations and firing consistently low-performing teachers. Varlas (2013) recommended the following retention strategies where top teachers plan to keep teaching at their school twice as long: provide regular feedback, help identify areas of development, provide critical feedback about performance, recognize accomplishments, recognize those teachers who are high performing, identify opportunities or paths for teacher leader roles, place high-performing teachers in charge of important tasks, and provide access to additional resources. In Baltimore, these conversations led to changes in how certain districts do compensation and induction. Now, teachers move up in pay based on earning 12 achievement units, which is determined from evaluation scores as well as professional development.

Green and Cypress (2009) contended that some factors are fundamental considerations for effective change to occur in alternative middle schools. These factors may include the incorporation of research-based action plans, implementation of variable class sizes (coupled with actual procedures and policies for disruptive behavior), and establishment of ongoing



support of the superintendent. Additionally, secondary variables of concern include maintaining a firm commitment from all school leaders, controlling the rumor mill, establishing effective communication, as well as collaborating, wherein the school addresses the needs of the whole student. These embody strong leadership practices (Duke, 2004; Elmore, 2003; Green & Cypress, 2009).

Green and Cypress (2009) created the following four-dimensional leadership outline that incorporates the change process stages:

Dimension I: Understanding Self and Others

Stage 1—Defining the Standard of Excellence

Dimension II: Understanding the Complexity of Organizational Life

Stage 2—Assessing Current Conditions

Stage 3—Identifying the Discrepancy

Stage 4—Assessing the Cause of the Discrepancy

Stage 5—Identifying the Needed Change

Dimension III: Building Bridges Through Relationships

Stage 6—Assessing Change Capacity

Stage 7—Building Change Capacity

Dimension IV: Engaging in Leadership Best Practices

Stage 8—Implementing the Change Initiative

Stage 9—Conducting Evaluations

Senese and Arnold (2010), Schwerdt and West (2011), and San Antonio, Marcell, Tieken, and Wiener (2011) discussed the educational landscape, outlining important considerations for all educators in an alternative setting, including small class sizes, flexibility,

transitional support, cost effectiveness of programs, student growth or enrollment criteria, school climate, and accountability. Flexibility refers to the adjustments in scheduling, programs offered, and teaching styles that vary as changes occur to enhance the program. Transitional support concentrates on the services provided in order to ensure a smooth and successful transition. Enrollment considerations are crucial and require a support commitment from the central office not to exceed a certain number in order to maintain the school's effectiveness, yet prove to be cost effective, all the while anticipating and being prepared for student growth. Finally, school climate, accountability, and relationships are critical factors directly related to and supportive of the findings in this study (Senese & Arnold, 2010).

Leadership for effective alternative public schools requires thinking out of the box, which Hurwitz (2007) and Easton and Soguero (2011) suggested in their research to create an effective learning environment for alternative students. These researchers recommended building staff capacity and school advocacy as well as developing a shared vision and collective responsibility for student success. They also suggested establishing a climate for academic success and designing relevant programs that connect students to school and the community (Blumm, 2005; Price, Martin, & Robertson, 2010).

According to the Center for Disease Control and Prevention (2009), school connectedness was found by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to be the strongest protective factor for students to decrease substance use, school absenteeism, early sexual activity, violence, and risk of unintentional injury. Blum (2005) outlined four factors that can increase school connectedness that include adult support, belonging to a positive peer group, commitment to education, and a positive, structured school environment.

Blum recognized six strategies that increase school connectedness:

1. Create decision-making processes that facilitate student, family, and community engagement.
2. Provide educational opportunities that empower families to be actively involved in their children's academic and school life.
3. Provide students with academic, emotional, and social skills that lead them to being actively engaged in school.
4. Use effective classroom management and teaching methods to foster a positive learning environment.
5. Provide professional development and ongoing support for teachers and other school staff that empower them to meet the diverse cognitive, emotional, and social needs of children and adolescents.
6. Create trusting and caring relationships that promote open communication among administrators, teachers, staff, students, families, and communities.

“Eight Plus Five Equals Ten,” an alternative math program that stands for eight themes, five expectations, and 10 commitments (Easton & Soguero, 2011), encapsulates individualized learning, pathways, and assessments that incorporate interdisciplinary classes with a service-learning focus, high-interest classrooms, block scheduling, a wilderness trip, and interactive classrooms. In order to create an effective learning environment for alternative students, schools must develop several leadership skills and offer opportunities for growth.

Eagle Rock School, intentionally small (96 students), has limited rules with five nonnegotiable mandates related to drugs, alcohol, sex, violence, and smoking. Not grouped by age or grade level, students participate within groups according to their advisories, special teams, or committees. Community (school assemblies) events are held every morning with collaboration rather than competition as the model. Time requirements for graduation vary, and each student's

pathway through the curriculum is different. In order to graduate, students must demonstrate proficiency through individual presentations held three times a year and at graduation.

Teachers devise high-interest classrooms, focus on interdisciplinary service-learning, and utilize a 90-minute block schedule model. The curriculum, according to Easton and Soguero (2011), introduces an outdoors- and service-influenced educational design where students are initiated into the program on a wilderness trip.

The most effective schools develop a vision, empower staff, and advocate for the school program at the local community and district levels (Leech & Fulton, 2002). Designing effective instructional programs for alternative school students involves higher level thinking skills, rigorous projects, and connection with the community. Also, nurturing parental support remains crucial because parents who feel supported by the school more willingly take risks and trust the school staff (Hurwitz, 2007).

Price, Martin, and Robertson (2010) posited that alternative education administrators require strengths in relation to encouraging inquiry, decisiveness, moving forward, and networking. Oftentimes, effective alternative schools organize themselves around a particular principle or theme, such as personalized education; college preparation; professional, technical, behavior and social skills; community of learners; credit recovery; dropout prevention; or service learning (Duke, 2004; Elmore, 2003; Green & Cypress, 2009; Hurwitz, 2007; Senese & Arnold, 2010). Edmunds and Glennie (2006) and Greenlee and Brown (2009) maintained that financial incentives, working conditions, and principal behaviors, in addition to a collaborative and collegial environment, appear crucial for teacher retention in challenging schools.

Reeves (2009) addressed conquering myths, building commitment, and obtaining results by creating conditions for change, planning change, implementing change, and sustaining

change. He also noted that among the variables that influence student achievement, the two with the most profound influences include teacher quality and leadership quality. Providing teacher quality and leadership quality in an alternative setting requires financial incentives, improved working conditions, and positive and supportive, yet firm and respectful principal behaviors and strong leadership (Greenlee & Brown, 2009).

Additional suggestions for high-quality teachers and leaders in alternative schools include greater autonomy, available resources to create strong curriculum innovations, opportunities for professional development, greater authority in school-based decision making, salary bonuses, and enhanced retirement benefits (Greenlee & Brown, 2009). Principal behaviors include demonstrating integrity; creating a positive school culture; providing opportunities for teachers to plan, team, and work together; using shared leadership and decision making to enhance the staff's desire; and being willing to focus energy on achieving educational excellence (Edmunds & Glennie, 2006; Greenlee & Brown, 2009). Along those same lines, Gibson (2008) stressed the importance of middle school principals spending 30% of their time on classroom management.

Bartlett (2012) addressed five fundamental shifts in thinking and behavior to keep schools continually moving toward excellence. He argued that educational excellence is not some place or state of being but rather a continuously moving target and an ever-evolving concept. The five paradigm shifts include from the top-down, "leadership to collaboration," when shared leadership causes employees to feel a connection in the decision-making process. This process causes employees to work harder and more effectively. The second shift stems from "complacency to action," where continual improvement and the desire for greatness are expected by everyone. "Best for adults to best for students" is the third shift, where doing what is best for students becomes the number one priority. This requires teachers to maintain high expectations

for all of their students by creating positive student–teacher relationships. Accentuating the positive was reiterated in Dempsey’s classroom when she asked, “Where is Jason, being he is never absent?” “He got suspended, Miss Dempsey,” the students replied. As she gasped in surprise, one young lady stated, “He’s not a nice person, Miss Dempsey. He’s just good to you because you think he’s good” (Dempsey, 2012). From “all students to every student” is the fourth shift, which implies that every student is unique and has different abilities, and every student is important. It instills preparing programs that are meant to stretch each student, place safety nets where needed, and ensure every student who needs a boost receives one. Finally, the fifth shift from “teaching to learning” focuses on monitoring student learning rather than teacher instruction.

Covey (2008) emphasized long-known character qualities and personal practices as synonymous with success. Implementation of these qualities and practices enables schools and parents around the world to inspire greatness in others one child at a time. Covey’s book, *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*, offers many examples of how administrators, teachers, parents, and students can incorporate habits for success into their daily lives. Those habits include being proactive, that is, starting with a goal; prioritizing; being positive; thinking win–win; knowing your material before you teach or share it; synergizing and collaborating; and then refining (Covey, 2008).

### **Best Practices for Alternative Schools**

Barr and Parrett (2008) outlined 50 proven strategies for revitalizing at-risk students and low-performing schools. The strategies include, but are not limited to, broad topic ideas, such as understanding the at-risk student; educating poor and culturally diverse students; establishing

priorities that focus on student learning; collaborating with parents and families; and creating caring classrooms, schools, and communities of support.

Additional strategies include creating a climate that fosters respect in schools and classrooms, expecting high-academic performance, teaching all students to read, selecting results-driven instructional and assessment practices, supporting social and emotional growth, and using community resources and services (Barr & Parrett, 1995; Barr & Parrett, 1997). Along similar lines to foster respect in schools is recognizing the positive with the Positive Behavioral Intervention and Support program (Wieder, 2012). This systems approach establishes the social culture and behavioral supports needed for schools to create effective learning environment for all students. Students carry 6 in. x 9 in. cards from class to class, earning paw-shaped punches for demonstrating the three Rs: respect, responsibility, and ready to learn. Twice a month, the students purchase merchandise based on the number of punches on their cards. Students also earn “cat cash” coupons from the administrator by being respectful, being ready, and cultivating relationships. Finally, the students can trade their cat cash for a snack or a “dress-in-jeans-day sticker.”

O’Neil, Kellner, Green, and Elias (2012) provided effective proactive and reactive prevention strategies for harassment, intimidation, and bullying (HIB). These strategies require every HIB occurrence to be treated with urgency and sensitivity. The action team not only promptly investigates the incidents and plans the school’s response but coordinates school-wide training and other measures to prevent future incidents. Every school should have an HIB action team or specialized team that responds to all types of victimization (O’Neil et al., 2012). The composition of the team may vary from school to school but generally consists of administrator, counselor, social worker, and instructional staff members.

Components of the investigation for a prompt and thorough investigation include identifying all the perpetrators and victims; alerting victims and parents of rights and responsibilities; thoroughly interviewing participants individually, including alleged victims, perpetrators, and bystanders; determining if there is a confirmed incident of HIB; identifying and evaluating the kinds of damage caused by the incident; and considering all of the factors necessary for complete corrective action, including the involvement of parents. Finally, the staff must continue with follow-up procedures with the individual victimized, including an assessment of the victim's overall social situation at school with the intention to provide the necessary support for the student through relationships with staff members. Once the perpetrator is identified, a follow-up meeting with an action team member and principal follows, recognizing the behavior as unacceptable, after which the school metes out a range of consequences for such action. Lastly, zero-tolerance policies and approaches should be avoided due to the inconsistent application of consequences that are meted out more frequently to minority student populations. In addition, zero-tolerance policies are extreme, consisting of suspension or expulsion and do not differentiate frequency of the offense or severity (O'Neil et al., 2012).

Myers (2009) focused on strategies to manage discipline now. Idaho's Post Falls Middle School reached an all-time low of disciplinary infractions between 2005 and 2007. Out-of-school suspensions dropped 77%; in-school suspensions went down 38%; trancies dropped 76%; fights went down 44%; and bullying, harassment, or intimidation decreased by 69%. So what happened at Post Falls?

The first step required the school community to establish a goal and commit to bringing discipline levels down in the building. This entailed an agreement from all staff that meeting this goal was everyone's responsibility. The second step involved revisiting strategies and making a



building-wide commitment to the staff. Strategies consisted of all staff being in hallways between class periods; improving supervision before school, during lunch, and after school; meeting with teams about individual students and ensuring parents and students were part of the team when necessary; and alerting parents promptly by phone or e-mail for excellent or challenging behaviors of students. Top-level support required students to be seen as soon as they arrived to the office by the administration, and a call was made while a student was in the administrator's office each time a student was referred to the office. Finally, adjustments were made throughout the year to the student handbook and reviewed by a committee of parents, educators, and students. This took place unilaterally when all stakeholders felt there was a need, as opposed to waiting until the following year. Setting goals, establishing commitment from the community, changing the philosophy, and being flexible rather than stoic enabled Post Falls' significant improvement with managing discipline (Myers, 2009).

Duke and Griesdorn (1999) developed considerations for the design of alternative schools, criteria for determining the effectiveness of alternative schools, and indicators of academic achievement. These collective components evaluated the percentage of students whose GPAs improved after arriving at an alternative school, who earned general education degrees, who returned to a regular secondary school and earned passing grades, and, finally, who improved their scores on standardized tests.

Another applicable component measured the reduction in the dropout rate of the alternative school against the district rate as well as in the reduction in the percentage of failing grades. Finally, Duke and Griesdorn (1999) agreed that the following structural questions need revisiting on a regular basis to revamp and improve alternative school programs, staff, and facilities: How should alternative schools organize themselves for the most effective instruction?

How should alternative schools arrange the learning environment and handle discipline? Should schools permanently place students in alternative settings?

Sundius and Connolly (2011) concurred that too many absences as early as sixth grade predicted the likelihood that a student will eventually drop out of school. Their study prevented school administrators from suspending students for more than five days without express permission from the central office. This, in turn, spurred principals to examine levels of support and intervention prior to suspension. Another consideration involved ending social promotion. Meta-analysis results, based on 64 studies, determined the benefits of promotion favored retention by an average of 0.4 standard deviations (Shaw, 2011; Viadero, 2000).

Elias (2013) argued the numerous policies and practices that favor incarceration over education do all a grave injustice. Her study reviewed hundreds of school districts across the country, which employ discipline policies that push students out of the classroom and into the criminal justice system. Elias (2013) referred to this alarming occurrence as the school-to-prison pipeline that starts in school with zero-tolerance policies in which teachers remove students from the classroom. Those removed students then become participants in the criminal justice system. Racial minorities and children with disabilities were disproportionately represented in the pipeline (Elias, 2013).

Consider that African–American students are 3.5 times more likely than their white classmates to be suspended or expelled, according to a nationwide study by the U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights. Black students constitute 18% of students, yet they account for 46% of students with more than one suspension. Equally troubling, 8.6% of public school children have been identified with disabilities; however, these students make up 32% of the youth in juvenile detention centers (Elias, 2013).

Chiarello (2013) provided a teacher's guide to rerouting the pipeline and keeping at-risk students in the classroom. The guide includes practical advice regarding how to dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, including applicable teacher responses and reflections addressing verbal disrespect, dress code violations, lateness or truancy, aggressive physical behavior, and fighting. The guide is designed to help teachers be responsive to problems as opposed to punitive in their actions.

"Michael" is defiant and uses inappropriate language when verbally redirected. A punitive-minded teacher's reactions may argue with Michael, kick him out of class, or refer him for disciplinary action. On the other hand, a responsive teacher's feedback may involve all or a combination of the five guideline shifts:

Shift 1: Adopt a social-emotional lens that generates the following response: How can I address Michael's feelings of powerlessness so he is less defensive when I assert my authority?

Shift 2: Know your students and develop your cultural competency; for example, how might my words, tone, and body language make Michael feel disrespected?

Shift 3: Plan and deliver effective student-centered instruction; for example, how can I differentiate my instruction to better meet Michael's needs and tap his strengths?

Shift 4: Move the paradigm from punishment to development; for example, how can I use assertive communication to demonstrate empathy, explain disappointment, and set expectations for changed behavior?

Shift 5: Resist the criminalization of school behavior; for example, what are the consequences for Michael if he misses class because he is suspended (Chiarello, 2013)?

In 1988, the Association of Supervision Curriculum and Development presented another option that accelerated students who had fallen behind to complete seventh and eighth grades in

one school year. The strategies focused on small class sizes, key concepts, enrichment activities and manipulatives, technology, parental involvement consisting of two classroom visits per semester, and fostering organizational skills and study habits during advisory sessions.

Lehr and Lange (2003) described alternative schools as those with enrollment by choice or placement, typically not choice alone, conducted in a separate location, which included students predominantly at risk of dropping out or failing. Major issues related to alternative schools included funding, staffing, and accountability.

Typically, the staff of an alternative middle school consists of one teacher per subject for reading, math, language, social studies, and science; a counselor; transition specialist; and an administrator (Duke & Griesdorn, 1999). Fenzel and Flippen (2006) suggested using college graduates to volunteer as a cost-effective approach to improving students' engagement and performance in school.

Balfanz (2011) shared a similar plan of an early warning system, in which schools assign "Near Peers" to students beginning to fall off track. The Near Peer adult follows a student throughout the day and provides attendance monitoring, tutoring, mentoring, and homework support. Davis (2012) addressed the benefits of an early warning system that tracks students at risk and their college readiness for the most at-risk students. The indicators include chronic absenteeism of 20 days or more, failing English or math or a failing average for English, math, social studies, and science.

A successful alternative nativity middle school for urban minority children incorporates the following structural paradigms: limiting class size from five to 16 students engaged in an extended-day program from 7:30 a.m. to 5:00 p.m., using double periods for language and

reading classes and assigning homework four days per week in math, with additional after-school help Monday through Thursday (Fenzel & Monteith, 2008).

In studies of a Jesuit academy in which parents played a pivotal role, the school day extended 12 hours, and the school year extended 11 months (Grant, 2008). Kerka (2003) and Shirley (2009) noted that alternative programs require a holistic approach that encompasses social, academic, psychological, and career-related needs and highlighted eight factors that recur in research reports and descriptions of effective alternative programs: caring adults; a sense of community; a focus on assets; respect for youth; high expectations; holistic, comprehensive, multidimensional developmental curriculum and support; and long-term follow-up services.

Oregon's Cottrell Middle School, offered a world of work within its walls and provided students with jobs at the school. Cottrell's job program began in 1990 for special needs students to learn everyday living skills and to improve their self-esteem. As the program became more attractive and popular, it expanded to all interested students. A wide range of student job selections included physical education assistant, science aide, playground assistant, groundskeeper, lunchroom orderly, recycler, clerical aide, custodial assistant, gym manager, student store manager, and substitute. The students worked for 20-minute spans during the day but not during academic periods and earned wages in the form of tokens to spend on parties, field trips, or items from the student store or at an auction at the end of the year (Yatvin, 1995).

Raywid (2001) indicated that a mismatch between the learner and the learning system raises the following questions: Is the school at risk of failing the child? Do we change the child or the environment? Practices for effective alternative programs include clear focus on academic learning, ambitious professional development, strong autonomy and professional decision making, and a sense of community (Leone & Drakeford, 1999). These researchers also suggested

that alternative education programs need to find strategies that link their classrooms and instructional experiences to the community (Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Raywid, 2001; Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011).

Reimer and Cash (2003) detailed best practices for development, evaluation, and school improvement that emphasize mission, purpose, best practices, needs and issues, evaluation, various types, pitfalls, and implementation procedures. In addition, they recommended a student–teacher ratio of 10:1. Establishing a vision, mission, and motto that drives school policies, practices, and procedures was reiterated in our doctoral course work.

Dappalone (2013) suggested the use of technology provides an opportunity to make best practices even better. Specific strategies include building and maintaining a class website. Dappalone’s website links to all the reference materials, handouts, resources, and announcements that students need. The class website focuses students’ learning and excludes superfluous materials and information.

Dappalone also noted reducing the use of paper as a second key strategy in mobilizing technology in the classroom. Paper use is kept to a minimum by posting student materials for view on smartphones, tablets, or laptops, as well as using the interactive whiteboard. Required materials are posted on the website in a PDF format.

The third strategy, quick response (QR) codes on smartphones and tablets, links codes to electronic locations. These are extremely helpful if a student loses his or her paper copy. The student can scan the QR code from a friend’s copy and continue working.

Online research, referred to as “surgical searching,” is the fourth strategy. Students can locate specific information by simply using key words or phrases ideal for short, fast-paced lessons in the classroom. Today’s educators would agree that offering multiple avenues for

students to absorb a concept increases the likelihood of their mastering the material. Screencasts or recordings of a computer screen with audio narration offer a simple way to differentiate instruction and also enable the student to review the lecture at home. Finally, teachers use blogs to teach writing, and students are held accountable for their grammar, spelling, and style (Dappalone, 2013).

Young adolescents undergo more rapid and profound changes between the ages of 10 and 15 than at any other time in their lives. Therefore, they generally respond better to active learning rather than passive learning and social interaction with peers rather than limited interaction. Intellectually curious about the world, this age group responds positively to opportunities to connect their learning to real-life situations (Payne & Edwards, 2010).

Wachtel, O'Connell, and Wachtel (2010) produced a guide geared toward coordinating and facilitating restorative conferences—meetings between offenders, victims, and both parties' family and friends. In restorative conferences, the participants deal with the consequences of the offense and decide how best to repair relationship and communication. Restorative conferences can change the way individual schools and participants respond to wrongdoing in the schools, the criminal justice system, and workplaces.

The Drum Circle project provided percussion training with a small group of students and taught them various beats, rhythms, and sounds. It also proved effective for at-risk youth to improve perceptions of self-worth and to foster genuineness and mutual vulnerability, enabling a better learning environment. A majority of the students reported feeling better about themselves, and the group helped them to feel more open. Half of the students who participated in the Drum Circle project reported that the group helped them with stress, anger, lack of motivation, as well as with self-confidence (Snow & D'Amico, 2010). Johnson and Lampley (2010) revealed the

success of a mentoring program titled “Listen,” in which students received fewer discipline referrals, improved their attendance and grades, and achieved academic gains in all three areas after one year of implementation.

The following recommended alternative education strategies reduce violence in the school and community: low ratio of students to teachers, highly structured classroom with behavioral classroom management, positive rather than punitive emphasis on behavior management, adult mentors at school, individualized behavioral interventions based on functional behavior assessment, social skills instruction, high-quality academic instruction, and parent involvement (Tobin & Sprague, 2000). Establishing an alternative education program requires proactive screening, avoiding negative effects, and obtaining support when implementing and evaluating students’ performances.

Research-based alternative education strategies recommend a low ratio of students to teachers and a highly structured classroom with behavioral management practices. Another strategy incorporates a levels advancement system along with a positive emphasis rather than punitive emphasis in behavior management. Also suggested are adult mentors located at the school, individualized behavioral interventions based on functional behavioral assessment, social skills instruction, and high-quality academic instruction (Gilson, 2006; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Van Acker, 2007).

The challenges or most contentious issues middle schools face involve structure, curricular and instructional processes, safety, responsiveness, and parent and public relations (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002; Quinn & Poirier, 2006; Schwerdt & West, 2011; Shirley, 2009; Tobin & Sprague, 1999; Williamson & Johnston, 2000). Quinn and Poirier (2006) identified the following seven necessary components for an effective alternative program: program



philosophies emphasized an overall educational approach rather than focusing on individual students who primarily needed to be changed in order to accommodate learning differences among at-risk students; program and school administrators and staff needed to support the vision and mission of their programs, listen to teachers, students, and parents effectively, and to care genuinely about their students; these researchers considered low adult–student ratios in the classroom as integral to successful outcomes; teachers received specialized training to support their effectiveness in working with students who do not succeed in traditional educational settings; interactions between students and the staff were supportive in nature; positive, trusting, and caring relationships existed among staff and between students and staff; schools also valued the opinions and participation of family members in the education of their children and treated them with respect.

Champeau (2011) stressed that great relationships are the prerequisite for good learning outcomes. A well-organized advisory program that meets frequently, has a curriculum, and employs strategies that links students to their learning not only transforms a school’s culture but provides support to all students including those who are at risk of failing or dropping out (Champeau, 2011). In other words, one of the best investments a school can make is the implementation of an advisory program to build relationships, support, and increase learning for all students.

Key components for an effective alternative program must incorporate small class sizes, a limited student body, and a personalized school environment in which students feel included in the decision-making process, flexibility, and effective classroom management. Additional key components include choice, high expectations of and belief in students, special teacher training, parental involvement, collaboration, administrative support, behavior support, classroom

management, school- and work-based learning, and screening and referral (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Johnston, Cooch, & Pollard, 2004; Reimer & Cash, 2003).

The five most pressing needs among at-risk students include habilitating classrooms and schools, marketable and practical skill-building courses, caring teachers and administrators, small nontraditional classes, and academic life and social skills classes (Shirley, 2009). Kleiner, Porch, and Farris (2002) noted that students referred to alternative schools are at risk of educational failure as demonstrated by poor grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, and suspension.

### **Conclusion**

The current student dropout rate in U.S. public schools is astronomical and is, therefore, creating a significant socioeconomic impact on both current and future generations, as well as indicating the number of students in the future who will fail to obtain high school diplomas. Research indicates that an alternative school, defined as an instructional program different and separate from the regular classroom instruction, is one strategy to address this epidemic.

Current social and medical research confirms that more rapid and profound changes occur between 10 to 15 years of age than in any other time in one's life (Payne & Edwards, 2010). Finally, the literature reveals that a few key components for an effective alternative program include small class size and limited student body, effective classroom management, high expectations, parental involvement, collaboration, school- and work-based learning, and screening and referral (D'Angelo & Zemanick, 2009; Johnston, Cooch, & Pollard, 2004; Reimer & Cash, 2003).

## Chapter III

### Design and Methodology

Seeking input from former students of Span Academy, this study endeavored to uncover the most effective practices in an alternative middle school setting. Incorporating information gained from the literature review assisted in determining the design and methodology for this study.

#### Research Design

A complementary, mixed-methods design best suited this study. Greene, Caracelli, and Graham (1989) suggested that “qualitative and quantitative methods are used to measure overlapping but also different facets of a phenomenon, yielding an enriched, elaborated understanding of that phenomenon” (p. 5). Quantitative research was the most effective method for determining the correlation of variables and for developing a regression analysis.

A mixed methodology, including interviews, determined best practices in an alternative middle school setting from students’ perspectives. Data collected consisted of conversational interviews and quantifiable research data. The quantitative data consisted of ISAT scores, GPAs, and current placements and attendance records of students prior to attending Span Academy and following their completion of the program.

Predata and postdata gleaned from students, who successfully completed the program, were compared, analyzed, and placed into (SPSS). An audit trail of the qualitative data, including notes, phone calls, and interviews, was kept. Interviews were coded and grouped by theme.

Themes were then integrated based on either comprehensive sharing or specific limited sharing. Data collection concluded with the final participant and after the transcripts revealed no new themes (Marshall & Rossman, 2011). The study provided member checking with each

participant to confirm that the final statement reflected his or her experience with the phenomena (Willig, 2007).

The challenge herein was to eliminate all preconceived notions, biases, and judgments about the mixed study and to focus on in-depth exploration of the actual case, rather than to identify a cultural theme (Russell, 2011). Concurrent and paramount within the study parameters was to mitigate manipulation of the participants (Walker, 2007). This genre provided detail, occurred in a natural environment, was gathered in the most nonintrusive way possible, and was compiled with findings from other research studies to gain a more comprehensive understanding of the phenomena (Russell, 2011).

Several themes emerged and recurred regarding alternative schools, including, but not limited to, the following: stronger relationships; smaller class sizes; flexible schedules; service learning; and multiple interventions, such as study halls, after-school programs, tutorials, and recovery (Balfanz, 2011; Payne & Edwards, 2010). Therefore, this study sought feedback from the students' perspective regarding best practices in an alternative middle school setting that are necessary, the most effective, and the most helpful to students in pursuing their educational goals.

### **Participants**

The study to reveal best practices in an alternative middle school consisted of 10 students who attended Span Academy from 2009 to 2012, successfully transitioned to one of the district schools, and were passing their courses and earning credit. Span Academy includes seventh and eighth grades, mostly from the middle schools in the area, a few from surrounding districts, and some from private, charter, or home-school environments.

The Span Academy can serve 64 students each year, which equates to 16 students per class. The teaching staff consists of four teachers, three paraprofessionals, a counselor, a secretary, a part-time instructional coach, an online coordinator, and a principal. The city population slightly exceeds 44,500, and the school district includes approximately 8,300 kindergarten through 12th-grade students.

### **Data Collection**

The researcher conducted a pilot study consisting of five student interviews. The pilot study confirmed the viability of procuring questions specific to the problem and that were understandable by the respondents or study's subjects. Two interviews with each participant took place between October 2012 and November 2012. Both interview sessions took place during a 1-week period, in order to minimize misrepresentations and to preserve the students' memory regarding questions and responses previously discussed in the initial interview.

Following the start of data collection, analysis began. Analysis consisted of organizing the data, immersing into the data, generating categories and themes related to the data, coding the data, offering interpretations through analytic memos, searching for alternative understandings, and writing a report about the data.

Each phase of analyzing qualitative data consisted of data reduction and interpretation. These were recorded, transcribed, and coded for themes. Audio recordings were transcribed and identifiers removed. The transcripts were coded and categorized into themes, which were integrated, based on whether the theme was shared by all or shared by some.

Appendices C and D describe the respondent interview questions. Based on the themes, a final statement was determined, and member checking took place to confirm that the final statement reflected the experience with the phenomenon.

The quantitative aspect of the study consisted of predata and postdata related to students' attendance, GPAs, and ISAT scores. Analysis of this data determined whether attendance, GPAs, and ISAT scores improved among students who successfully transitioned from Span Academy. This data produced ordinal data because they would not be equally distributed and would enter the realm of procedures known as nonparametric statistics (Tanner, 2012).

### **Analytical Methods**

In the qualitative aspect of the research, the researcher served as the instrument. Therefore, the researcher was prepared, organized, focused, and deliberate in the interview protocol. The researcher used an echo smartpen recording device to code the transcripts and a professional transcriptionist to transcribe the interviews.

The interview protocol began by confirming names and demographics that included the students' names, ages, grade levels in school, and current placements. This strategy helped assure all participants felt safe, secure, and comfortable, a necessity described by Tanner (2012). Respondents selected an interview location from a preapproved list in order to foster the desired comfort level.

The researcher began by asking general questions to put respondents at ease and to remove any lingering stress or wariness with the process. Respondents were reminded that their answers were personal, based on their individual experiences, perceptions, and considerations, and, therefore, a specific response was not expected. Similarly, each respondent learned that the process could stop at any time. He/she also learned that all responses were completely confidential, and his/her individual identity would not be disclosed. In addition, the researcher adhered to time limits as indicated in this study's description.

For the quantitative portion of this mixed study, a comparison of students' attendance, GPAs, and ISAT scores prior to attending Span Academy and following their successful completion of the program were analyzed and inserted into SPSS for analysis and calculations. A significant difference in all areas was anticipated.

Forms used in this study consisted of the following: a confederate telephone call script (see Appendix A), consent forms for those 18 years and older (see Appendix B), assent forms for those 18 years and under (see Appendix C), first-round interview questions (see Appendix D), second-round interview questions (see Appendix E), and an interview observation form (see Appendix F). First-round interviews began in October 2012. All second-round interviews were completed by December 2012.

### **Limitations**

Limitations for this study included the researcher's passion, vision, and beliefs regarding alternative schools and the researcher's experience and current position as the school principal. In addition, the allotted time frame to complete this undertaking extended from August 2012 through April 2013.

The researcher's history and background in education alluded to some bias. The researcher began his educational career coaching and guest teaching in 1990, which led to his first official teaching and coaching contract in 1992. He completed a master's degree in Athletic Administration in 1995 and assumed that role through 1999. During that period, he completed his Education Specialist Degree in Education Administration. He also served as the assistant associate principal for two years at the middle school level prior to accepting a vice-principal position at the elementary level.

From 1999 to 2009, the researcher served as vice-principal at several district elementary schools. From these collective experiences, he learned a great deal while working under several different principals with various strengths and insights.

Approached in 2009 to apply for the principal position at Span Academy, an alternative middle school for grades 6 through 8, the researcher accepted the position, and the district hired him. He spent his first year focusing on structure, order, and classroom management plans connected to the school-wide disciplinary system.

In his second full year as principal, he focused on curriculum, restructuring, scheduling, service-learning projects, and implementing End of Course assessments that aligned with the district's assignments. He incorporated school uniforms and implemented common grading and assessment practices during his third year as administrator.

The researcher is presently serving his fourth year as principal at Span Academy and feels honored to be a part of a district that offers these opportunities for students "at promise" or "at risk." The researcher recently accepted an invitation to serve on the Idaho Middle Level Association board and is currently completing his Doctorate of Education program in Educational Leadership at Northwest Nazarene University.



## **Chapter IV**

### **Results**

#### **Introduction**

The findings of the study herein include representative themes and analyses of the data. Two interview sessions took place with 10 former Span Academy students. Ten specific questions were posed during both interview sessions to determine best practices in an alternative middle school setting from the students' perspective. Participant responses generated the following framework:

1. What were the experiences, successes, and struggles of students who successfully transitioned from the Span Academy to another school in the district?
2. What implemented practices led students to achieve Level 5 and complete Span Academy's program?
3. What feedback did the students who attended Span Academy offer to administrators in an alternative middle school setting based on their personal experiences?
4. What did the data indicate regarding attendance, GPA, and ISAT scores prior to entering and after completing Span Academy?

#### **Summary of the Results**

A total of 10 participants shared their experiences, successes, and struggles related to their individual perceptions about best practices in an alternative middle school setting. Each participant responded to 20 questions. Their responses to the four research questions engendered two overarching themes within a structured framework.

In essence, this study sought to provide recommendations regarding best practices to alternative school administrators, specifically, alternative middle schools. The study asserted that

each participant affiliated with the research contributed recommendations would ultimately assist with determining best practices in an alternative middle school environment.

A conclusion to research Questions 1 and 2 was derived from a compilation of responses and various quotes from the 20 interview questions. Analysis of that compilation resulted in a structured framework with two overarching themes: accountability and relationships.

Question 3 was a compilation of the feedback, suggestions, and ideas provided from the 10 qualitative participants. Analysis of responses to Question 4 was derived from the quantitative data related to attendance, GPA, and ISAT scores prior to entering and after completing Span Academy.

The quantitative data was collected from 17 former students who attained Level 5, transitioned to a nonalternative school in the district, and who currently attend school and are earning credit toward graduation. The dependent *t*-test was utilized along with Cohen's *d*. The dependent *t*-test was selected because the two compared groups included one group measured on two occasions. Cohen's *d* is a measure of effect size—how big or small the significant difference is.

### **Research Questions 1 and 2**

What were the experiences, successes, and struggles of students who successfully transitioned from the Span Academy to another school in the district? What implemented practices led students to achieve Level 5 and complete Span Academy's program?

#### **Accountability**

Participants described the climate at Span Academy as very strict, since eight out of 10 participants referenced this perception 31 times. Generally, students reached this conclusion in response to Span Academy's well-structured environment that incorporated a levels system.

Within the system, students must progress up the levels to Level 5, the highest, in order to transition out of the school.

Level 5 required students to maintain a 95% attendance rate, receive one or fewer write-ups per quarter, and sustain a C average in all their course work, along with full participation in outreach activities and counseling classes and sessions. A write-up is a written reference forwarded to the principal regarding an individual student's behavior infraction. Upon receipt, the principal reviews the account and meets with the student to address the infraction and afford the student an opportunity to defend his or her behavior or own up to the infraction, where merited individual consequence appropriate to the action is assessed. The teacher, student, and parent are informed. Once a decision is finalized, written documentation is sent home for a parent's signature to confirm that parents are aware of the disciplinary action. This strict but effective system was recognized by students to be productive in the long run.

The attendance policy at Span Academy required students to maintain a 95% attendance rate equivalent to missing only two to three days per quarter, or remain at Level 1. In addition to a school uniform, mandatory student-led parent-teacher conferences took place quarterly. Students felt the school held them to a higher level of accountability than their previous schools had.

For example, Jermaine commented, "At my other school, I didn't do any homework at all. I just got sent to IR (Intense Remediation) and I didn't get into trouble. Over here, you had to get your homework turned in or you got into trouble and got a write-up, so I had to do it, and it turned into a habit."

Students also commented on additional practices that supported the school's high level of accountability. Those practices included mandated after-school tutoring required of all students

missing assignments or receiving a failing grade in any core class. The after-school homework club provided access to school computers where individual students could complete required course work. Friday recovery provided gifted and talented students a time for enrichment and exploratory assignments. Friday recovery also offered students who needed additional time and help to finish missing or incomplete work. Math and language labs afforded individual students access to computers and individual tutoring to master specific math and language concepts. Finally, weekly progress reports included individualized accounts of students' current standing in all classes. Progress reports were sent home for a parent signature so that the Span Academy staff could confirm that each student's parent or guardian was aware of their child's current standing.

Although students initially balked at Span Academy's program, success brought recognition that the structure and high expectations pushed them to work harder. Similarly, the same high expectations and structure empowered students to perform better, helped them stay focused and on track, and proved to be a practical guide for ongoing success.

Jenny's mother commented, "The levels system pushed my daughter more than I've ever seen her pushed." Milo stated, "Without the levels, I wouldn't have passed as fast as I did. I probably would have taken my time, but with it, I moved through it pretty fast, and it helped out a lot."

Students also believed that smaller class sizes of 16 or fewer students contributed to their success via personal accountability. Fewer students led to more one-on-one help, small-group interactions, and more effective communication among peers and teachers. Students indicated they could receive the additional help they needed, and that the teachers seemed more encouraging and pushed the students harder.

When asked about the differences between Span Academy and their previous schools, student respondents referenced the following general insights including, but not limited to, more one-on-one help, smaller class sizes, and better relationships with teachers and peers. Jake stated, “Span Academy pulled me out of the gutter. I had A’s and B’s all over the place. It actually made me feel pretty good about myself.” A school uniform requirement was perceived as having higher expectations. Milo stated, “The Span Academy expected more and pushed you to achieve it.”

The warning signs for struggling Span Academy students became clearly evident. All of the students interviewed had failed at least one course, and 90% had failed multiple courses or summer school. With the exception of one respondent, students felt they would have benefited from attending Span Academy or a program like Span Academy beginning in seventh grade or earlier.

Another accountability factor this study affirmed involved the student’s response to individual 5-year plans. All students planned to graduate from high school, and 90% planned to graduate from college. Span Academy engendered accountability as a progenitor of success via a focus on commitment, goal setting, and determination echoed in the Academy motto, Commit 2 Graduate.

When asked what Span Academy offered that helped them become successful, Jack responded, “It helped me take accountability for what I’m doing. I am graduating class of 2015.” Dale’s father felt Span Academy provided the accountability necessary for Dale to take school seriously, to complete his homework, and to turn it in regularly. Jenny shared how the teachers at Span Academy “pushed me even when I transitioned back to my junior high.”

## **Relationships**

Relationships surfaced as the second of the two overarching themes revealed in the 20 interview questions. Limited student enrollment and smaller classroom numbers created an environment that provided opportunities for more one-on-one help between student and teacher. Smaller classroom size and subsequently the intimacy students' shared with their peers fostered better and more effective communication avenues amongst students, students to students as well as students to teacher. Fewer students per class nurtured small-group discussions, wherein daily participation was required.

During a pilot interview when the researcher was testing the instrument, one of the respondents recognized that fewer students in a class enabled students to get to know their teachers and classmates better. The camaraderie in the smaller classrooms created a more comfortable and better learning environment. Small-group cohesiveness has served as the guiding principle behind Span Academy's advisory class program, the ropes challenge course, and the year-end raft trip. The advisory class program has been a social skills class that teaches rapport amongst students and staff. The ropes challenge course has been a typical outdoor rope-climbing challenge course that instills confidence, discipline, trust, and teamwork. The year-end raft trip has been an opportunity for students to exhibit the social skills they've acquired throughout the year, including self-control, discipline, courtesy, civility, and teamwork, and simultaneously having a grand time. Students concurred that small-group learning sessions enhanced communication skills, self-confidence, and the ability to ask for help and assistance while at Span Academy, as well as after transitioning. Further, the same small-group learning sessions affirmed those same social skills in the students after transitioning.

Students' typical responses to questions about teachers at Span Academy can be summarized in the following legends. "The teachers were nice, really helpful and encouraging, and gave me more one-on-one help." The following comment by Isaac encapsulated the overall student response, "It is easier for the teachers to get to know us better and get to know how we learn." Jenny stated, "I learned how to build that type of bond with my teachers and carried it over when I transitioned." Jake stated, "They were awesome, I loved them." Milo said, "They would explain step by step, even if it would take all day." Jenny's mom reiterated, "The teachers here were golden; they were the key to the whole experience."

Respondents also appreciated the outreach program, or service-learning program, at Span Academy. The outreach program prepared and equipped students to give back to their community, while modeling cooperating, communicating, good citizenship, diplomacy, and relationship building amongst staff and peers. This program provided opportunities for middle-grade students to connect their world to real-life situations. Jenny stated, "The outreach program helped the community and others but also helped each other." Jermaine and others favored assisting at the animal shelter. In fact, Jermaine ultimately purchased a German Shepherd from the animal shelter. Planting trees resulted as Teddy's favorite, and Milo enjoyed most anything outside. Rowdy acknowledged his excitement with the adoption and implementation of a school library to be his favorite.

The students were asked about their first impression of Span Academy. Most responded negatively and believed that the Span Academy was primarily a warehouse for problem kids. The majority were scared and nervous about entering the academy. Jenny equated Span Academy with the last step on the road to dropping out. This stigma of Span Academy carried over when they attended functions outside of school and at the bus stop. Isaac stated, "It felt like

a punishment because I was forced to come here.” Even so, every participant indicated that longevity and success at Span Academy endeared the school and the program to them. They grew to appreciate the school and to enjoy attending. David asserted, “I definitely wouldn’t mind coming back!” Recognizing the many students who have returned to visit with staff on a regular basis confirmed the importance and lasting impression of relationships.

### **Research Question 3**

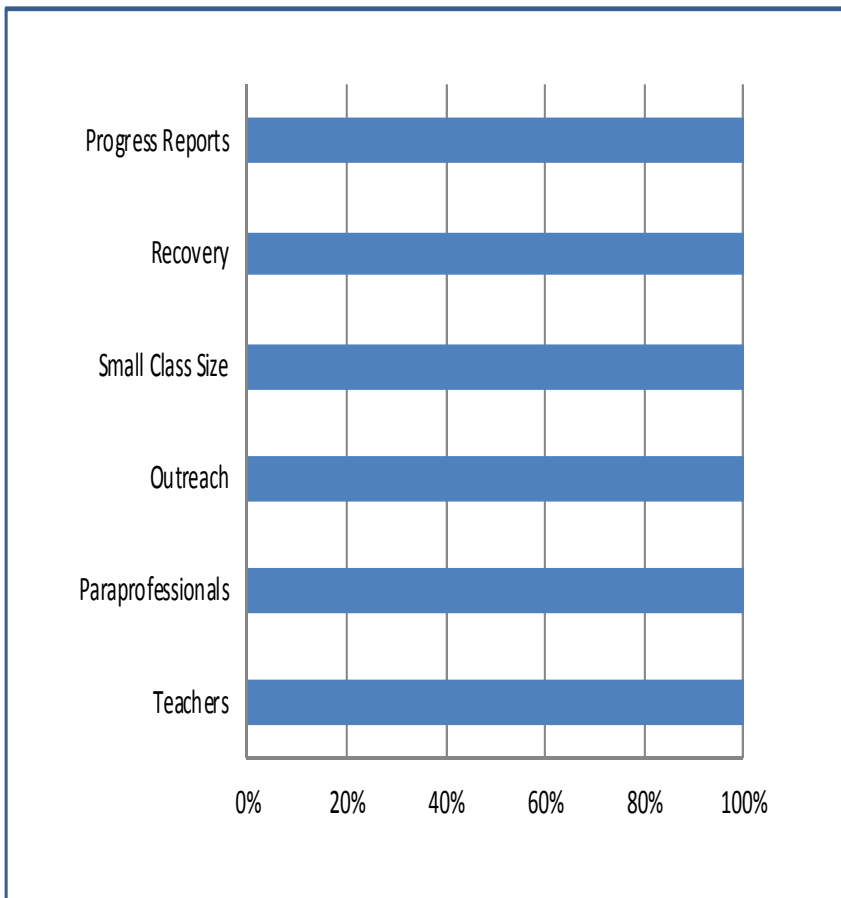
What feedback did the students who attended Span Academy offer to administrators in an alternative middle school setting based on their personal experiences?

The responses and feedback were derived from answers to questions both during interviews, as well as during the pilot interview questions. Figure 1 identifies six interventions most valued by the students.



Figure 1

*Top Interventions Based on Percentage of Span Academy Students' Responses*



Source: Data compilation of first-round interview question #10.

Figure 1 identifies interventions offered at Span Academy that the students felt were the most beneficial and helpful to their transition and current levels of success. Again, the most valued and beneficial interventions focused on relationships and accountability. Teachers, paraprofessionals in every class, and outreach all contributed to relationships; whereas, recovery and weekly progress reports focused more on accountability.

Outreach consisted of holding free car washes, painting classrooms, walking the dogs at the animal shelter, stocking shelves for Habitat for Humanity, organizing and preparing clothes at Deseret Industries, reading stories to elementary students, and writing letters to U.S. armed forces' veterans. Outreach or service-learning projects were held monthly throughout the school year and occurred on Friday from 1:00 p.m. to 2:40 p.m.

Multiple activities were designed and planned with input and assistance from the students. The projects were voluntary acts designed to give back to the community. Recovery opportunities were held approximately every other Friday for an hour and a half to provide support for students who needed additional assistance in order to master concepts or complete missing work. Students were assigned to classrooms where they could receive specific help in the areas needed.

Enrichment and extended activities were offered to those students who excelled and were gifted. Weekly progress reports were simplified versions of report cards that were sent home every Wednesday with individual students. These reports included grades, missing assignments, and notices regarding big projects. A parent-guardian signature was required to confirm a parent reviewed the weekly progress report and was aware of the child's progress or incomplete and missing work.

Equally associated with both themes were small class sizes. A total of 31 interventions were introduced to each student and the above referenced top six were attested as the most valued and beneficial. Noteworthy was that mandated after-school tutoring sessions, which were designed to provide necessary assistance for students to recover missing assignments and for those who struggled with comprehending concepts, did not make the list. Participant comments suggested this was a direct response to the negative consequences associated with the after-

school tutoring program as a mandated intervention. Students received write-ups for not attending a mandated after-school tutoring session.

The students responded to the following: “What did the Academy do to help you become successful?” Teddy affirmed, “[The Academy] helped me turn in my homework and receive one-on-one help from my teachers.” Beth shared, “[Span] helped me get better grades and were encouraging.” Dale asserted, “[Span] helped me do my work by interacting with people more, working in groups, and talking in class.” Isaac shared, “The Span Academy forced me to communicate more frequently with students and teachers which became easier, and I continue to do so today.” Rowdy averred, “Less kids, more one-on-one help.” “The teachers were really good about sitting down and helping you,” noted Milo.

Comprehensive review of student feedback also revealed some general insights into students’ perception about success. The student respondents acknowledged several of the currently utilized programs and offered suggestions for ongoing, continued success. Ninety percent of the students echoed a belief that starting at the Span Academy as early as seventh grade, or a program similar to Span Academy, would have contributed to their current levels of success. Similarly, students recognized the benefit of the outreach programs and the quality relationships they developed with their peers and the staff.

Students suggested less work on PLATO, a self-directed computer program, and more interactive learning. Several students gave a positive response to educators pushing them and suggested pushing even harder and increasing the pace to prepare them better for a traditional high school. Most of the students were captivated with the prospect of a 4-day week and believed it would foster camaraderie and success. Students also suggested incorporating science and social studies and more electives and field trips.

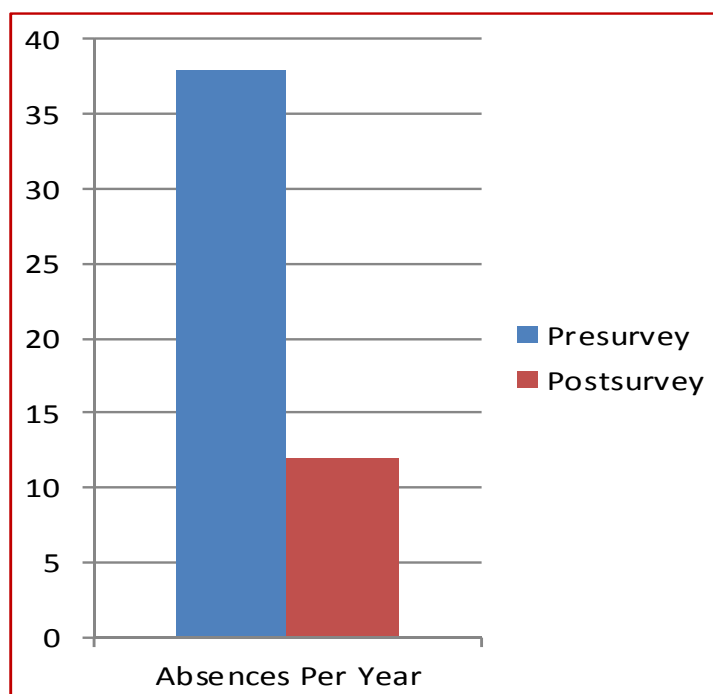
**Research Question 4**

What did the data indicate regarding attendance, GPAs, and ISAT scores prior to entering and after completing Span Academy? This section presents the findings and analyses of the quantitative data. In addition, this section presents the results of statistical analyses relevant to the hypotheses. The quantitative data incorporates information related to student attendance, GPA, and ISAT scores prior to attending Span Academy and after completing the program.

**Hypothesis One**

There will be no significant differences between attendance records, GPA, and ISAT scores prior to attending Span Academy and after completing the program. In order to answer this question, an independent *t*-test was conducted in relation to attendance, GPA, and ISAT scores prior to attending Span Academy and after completing the program, with a significant finding at  $p < .05$ .

Figure 2

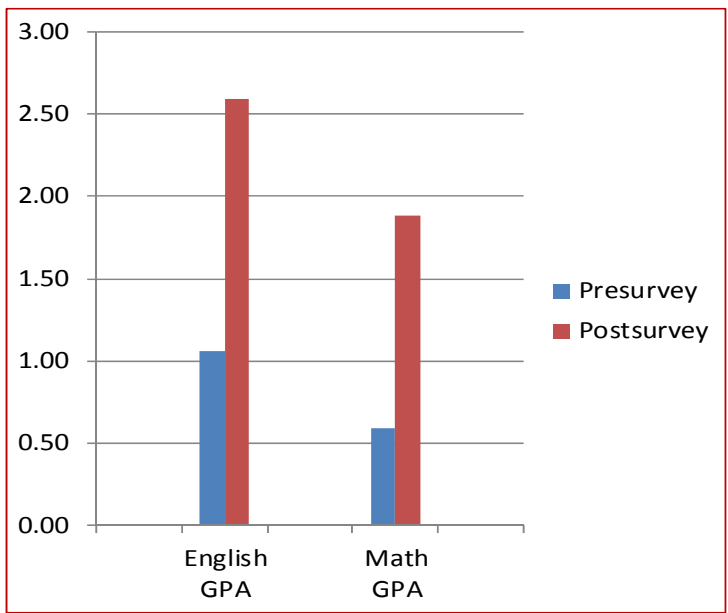
*Absences Before and After Attending Span Academy*

Source: District data retrieved from PowerSchool 2009–2012.

Figure 2 indicates the mean average number of absences accrued the year prior to attending Span Academy and the last year at Span Academy. An average improvement of 26 days resulted. The results also indicate a high and positive correlation, and Cohen's *d* recognized the effect size was large. For a complete compilation of data, see Appendix G, Table 5.

Figure 3

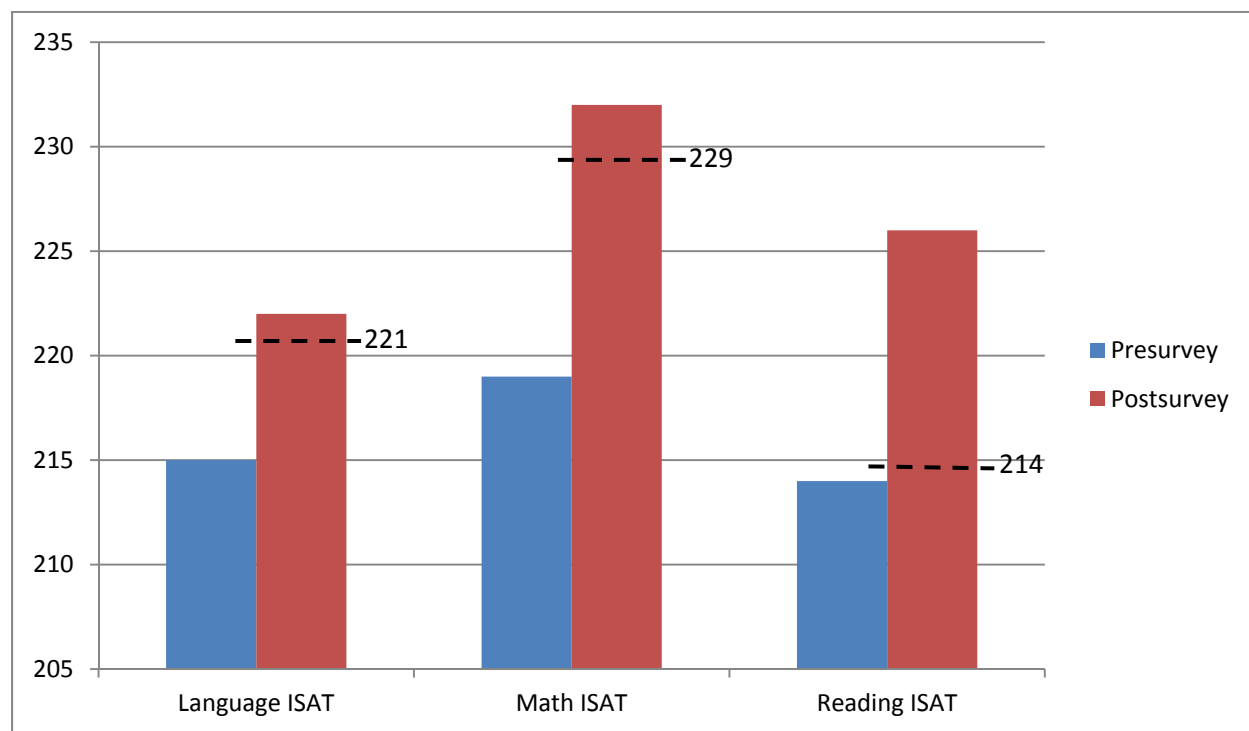
*GPA Before and After Attending Span Academy*



Source: District data retrieved from PowerSchool 2009–2012.

Figure 3 indicates the pre-GPA and post-GPA scores prior to and after completing Span Academy. An average GPA improvement of 1.5 in English and 1.3 in math became apparent. For a complete compilation of data, see Appendix I, Table 7.

Figure 4

*ISAT Scores Before and After Attending Span Academy*

Source: District data retrieved from PowerSchool 2009--2012.

ISAT proficiency cut scores    - - - - -

Figure 4 displays the ISAT scores in language, math, and reading prior to attending Span Academy and after transitioning from the program. An average mean growth of eight, 13, and 11 points resulted in language, math, and reading ISAT scores respectively. The proficiency rating in eighth grade for language, math, and reading were surpassed by the cut scores as indicated in the chart. For a complete compilation of data, see Appendix H, Table 6.

Figure 5

*Overall Themes of Span Academy*

Figure 5 visually depicts the importance of a defined structure. The foundation sustains two load-bearing beams consisting of accountability and relationships, thereby confirming that the foundation is the cornerstone to the structural framework. This simplistic representation epitomizes success in the educational arena, especially from a student's perspective. Both accountability and relationships emerge as the two supports within a structured environment that result in success. The students overwhelmingly affirmed the necessity of this paradigmatic structure in their collective comments describing the Span Academy. They echoed terms, such as strict progress reports, levels system, recovery, and uniforms; small class size, fewer students, more help, and one-on-one; outreach, paraprofessionals, and teachers depicted as caring, fun, encouraging, more comforting, and better communicators.



Table 1

*Paired Samples Statistics*

|        |                    | Mean   | N  | Std.<br>Deviation | Std. Error<br>Mean | Correlation | Paired<br>Differences<br>Mean |
|--------|--------------------|--------|----|-------------------|--------------------|-------------|-------------------------------|
| Pair 1 | Pre-English        | 1.0588 | 17 | 1.03              | 0.25               | 0.206       | 1.53                          |
|        | Post-English       | 2.5882 | 17 | 0.71              | 0.17               |             |                               |
| Pair 2 | Pre-Math           | 0.5882 | 17 | 0.71              | 0.17               | 0.357       | 1.29                          |
|        | Post-Math          | 1.8824 | 17 | 0.78              | 0.19               |             |                               |
| Pair 3 | Pre-Absences       | 38     | 17 | 45.81             | 11.11              | 0.881       | 26.0                          |
|        | Post-Absences      | 12     | 17 | 15.54             | 3.77               |             |                               |
| Pair 4 | Pre-ISAT Language  | 215    | 17 | 11.2              | 2.72               | 0.644       | 7.94                          |
|        | Post-ISAT Language | 223    | 17 | 9.06              | 2.2                |             |                               |
| Pair 5 | Pre-ISAT Math      | 219    | 17 | 7.49              | 1.82               | 0.500       | 13.12                         |
|        | Post-ISAT Math     | 232    | 17 | 7.35              | 1.78               |             |                               |
| Pair 6 | Pre-ISAT Reading   | 214    | 17 | 15.22             | 3.69               | 0.786       | 11.35                         |
|        | Post-ISAT Reading  | 226    | 17 | 14.75             | 3.58               |             |                               |

Table 1 quantifies the mean, sample size, standard deviation, standard error mean, correlation, and paired differences mean for GPAs in English and math, attendance, absences, and ISAT scores for language, math, and reading. The paired differences mean resulted in a

considerable improvement in all facets, including increased GPAs in both math and English, reduced absences, and an increase in ISAT scores in all three subjects. Four points are commonly equated to one year of growth. Therefore, language ISAT scores revealed two years of growth, and math and reading scores indicated three years. Finally, the post mean cut scores for language, math, and reading met or exceeded the state proficiency rating.

Table 2

*Paired Samples Test*

| Variable      | <i>p</i> value | Cohen's <i>d</i> |
|---------------|----------------|------------------|
| English GPA   | 3.93E-5        | 1.7              |
| Math GPA      | 1.06E-5        | 1.7              |
| Absences      | 0.005          | 0.8              |
| ISAT Language | 0.002          | 0.8              |
| ISAT Math     | 1.83E-5        | 1.8              |
| ISAT Reading  | 2.07E-4        | 0.8              |

Source: SPSS paired samples test *p* value and Cohen's *d*.

Table 2 displays the variable, *p* value and Cohen's *d*, where  $p < .05$  is considered significant. Cohen's *d* is a measure of effect size and is used as a counterpoint to indicate how big or small a significant difference is. This difference can be compared to Cohen's estimates of a small, medium, or large effect. The guiding scale to determine effect size designates the following: .2 = small, .5 = medium, .8 = large. As displayed, the effect size was considered large in all variables.

Table 3

*Themes*

| Pseudonym | Accountability | Levels: Grades, Guide,<br>Failing, Attendance | Strict | Less Students, 1 on 1,<br>More Help | Relationships: Caring,<br>Comforting, Encouraging,<br>Communication, Fun,<br>Confidence | Stigma | Outreach |
|-----------|----------------|---|--------|-------------------------------------|---|--------|----------|
| Teddy     | 4              | 3   |        | 10                                  | 3   | 4      | 1        |
| Beth      | 4              | 9   | 2      | 7                                   | 9   |        | 3        |
| Dale      | 4              | 3   | 4      | 2                                   | 10  | 1      | 1        |
| Isaac     | 3              | 4   | 7      | 8                                   | 5   | 3      | 3        |
| Jack      | 4              | 2   | 2      | 4                                   | 6   | 2      | 4        |
| Jenny     | 5              | 1   | 4      | 7                                   | 12  | 4      | 3        |
| Jermaine  | 7              | 3   | 5      | 7                                   | 2   |        | 2        |
| Rowdy     | 2              | 3   | 5      | 13                                  | 2   |        | 1        |
| Milo      | 3              | 2   |        | 8                                   | 7   |        | 3        |
| Jake      | 2              | 1   | 2      | 4                                   | 6   |        | 1        |
| Totals    | 38             | 31  | 31     | 70                                  | 62  | 14     | 22       |

Source: Themes generated from 10 former Span Academy students 2009–2012.

Table 3 encapsulates the comments, remarks, and focal points throughout the qualitative study. A levels system, structured environment, fewer students, increased support, and more one-on-one time with the teacher all accentuated and contributed to the theme of accountability. The second impetus force portrayed comments describing staff characteristics as caring, comforting, encouraging, and effectively communicating, instilling confidence in their students, supporting, and developing a strong rapport throughout the year with and among their students during outreach and advisory. Within a foundation of structure, these two overarching themes of accountability and relationships arose. This evidence continued to develop with each interview.

Table 4

*Participant Synopsis*

| Pseudonym | Gender | Ethnicity | Leadership Experience | Year Enrolled | Grade Level at Enrollment | Transition Length<br>< 1 yr., 1 yr., 2 yr. | Grade Level at Transition |
|-----------|--------|-----------|-----------------------|---------------|---------------------------|--|---------------------------|
| Teddy     | M      | White     | 2                     | 2010          | 8th                       | < 1  | 8th                       |
| Beth      | F      | Hispanic  | 3                     | 2011          | 8th                       | < 1  | 8th                       |
| Dave      | M      | Hispanic  | 2                     | 2010          | 7th                       | < 1  | 7th                       |
| Isaac     | M      | Hispanic  | 3                     | 2011          | 8th                       | 1  | 8th                       |
| Jack      | M      | White     | 2                     | 2010          | 7th                       | < 1  | 8th                       |
| Jenny     | F      | White     | 1                     | 2009          | 8th                       | < 1  | 8th                       |
| Jermaine  | M      | White     | 3                     | 2010          | 7th                       | 2  | 8th                       |
| Rowdy     | M      | Hispanic  | 1                     | 2009          | 8th                       | < 1  | 8th                       |
| Milo      | M      | Hispanic  | 2                     | 2010          | 8th                       | < 1  | 8th                       |
| Jake      | M      | White     | 2                     | 2010          | 8th                       | < 1  | 8th                       |

Source: Participant synopsis of former Span Academy students 2009–2012.

Note.  $N = 10$ .

The researcher aimed for an equal representation of participants from 2009 through 2011. Unfortunately, that did not occur based on the volunteers who participated in the study. As indicated, the majority of the participants were male, and the ethnicity resulted in an equal representation of White and Hispanic students. Eight of the 10 students transitioned to a traditional school in less than one year, and one student transitioned after one full year. Another student received two full years of instruction at Span Academy prior to transitioning back to a traditional school at the end of his eighth-grade year.

## **Chapter V**

### **Conclusion**

#### **Introduction**

In this fact-finding expedition, the researcher endeavored to answer the following question: What constitutes best practices in an alternative middle school setting from the students' perspectives? This mixed methodology was conducted, which included conversational interviews and quantifiable research data consisting of Idaho Standard Achievement Test scores, Grade Point Averages, and attendance records of students prior to attending Span Academy and following their completion of the program.

This study adds to the current literature related to alternative middle schools' findings of best practices from the students' perspectives. The significance of this research will aid in addressing the alarming statistics from as recently as 2010 that affirmed that a young person drops out of school every 26 seconds. In addition, an estimated 7,000-plus students drop out of school every day, and over 1 million students fail to graduate from high school annually (Aron, 2006).

This research coincides with the majority of other researchers' findings in which a significant number of U.S. public school students simply fail to meet the credits required to matriculate, are plagued with excessive absences, and battle behavioral and social issues. The reasons for this are numerous: boredom, irrelevant content, poor relationships with teachers and peers, lack of personal effort, poor attendance, and discipline policies that can lead to frequent discipline referrals, along with antisocial behaviors that lead to suspensions (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Many researchers postulate a mismatch between the learner and the learning system, which suggests that the schools are not meeting the needs of a certain group of students (Deschenes, Cuban, & Tyack, 2001; Raywid, 2001). In essence, the research reveals that a growing number of students will require an alternative structure in order to succeed.

As mentioned previously, the literature review studies reveal the need for implementation of several structural, academic, and social program reforms to accomplish student learning, matriculation, and social success for this growing population of at-risk students. The fundamental design for alternative education models has resulted in the creation of an environment conducive to learning and one that meets the needs of the student (Quinn & Poirier, 2006; Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006).

### **Summary of Results**

This study investigated best practices in an alternative middle school from a student's perspective. Due to the multiple variables involved with best practices in an alternative middle school, neither quantitative nor qualitative research independently was adequate to fully explore the phenomenon. Creswell (2008) stated that "the use of both quantitative and qualitative methods, in combination, provides a better understanding of the research problem and questions than either method by itself" (p. 552). In addition, one-on-one, open-ended interviews allow researchers to collect data about the experiences of people by asking specific questions (Creswell, 2008; Marshall & Rossman, 2011). In this dissertation study, a series of interviews with former Span Academy students, along with quantitative data consisting of attendance, GPAs, and ISAT scores, were utilized to determine best practices in an alternative middle school from a student's perspective.

Span Academy students overwhelmingly acknowledged the positive aspects of small class sizes, interpersonal relationships, encouraging and caring staff, student accountability, levels of achievement, support, and high expectations. In short, the students confirmed the integrity and success of Span Academy's structured program and highlighted two overarching themes: accountability and relationships.

### **Limitations**

The limitations for this study consisted of a small sample size of only 17 students, originally anticipated to be twice that amount. In addition, the confederate was not able to make contact with all of the eligible participants, thus conjointly limiting the totals. Adding to this challenge, the researcher was unable to contact one of the original respondents, during which time another respondent opted out of the study, and one parent declined to participate.

Second, the study took place in an alternative middle school, which has functioned under new leadership for fewer than four years. During the first year, the principal focused on structure, order, and classroom management plans connected to the school-wide discipline system. During his second year, he focused on curriculum, restructuring, scheduling, service-learning projects, and implementing end-of-course (EOC) assessments aligned to that of the school district. The incorporation of school uniforms and implementation of common grading and assessment practices occurred in his third year.

Third, the availability of EOC scores would have benefitted this study and findings by confirming information learned versus grade inflation. EOC assessments are utilized to confirm concepts have been mastered, as well as to compare student results district wide. The researcher discovered EOC scores in the middle school were not consistently available. The EOC scores were housed in a district-wide software program titled Milepost, an interactive electronic student

database warehouse software that enables all student data, including performance indicators, benchmarks, accommodations, interventions, and plans, along with student, parent, and district accountability measures.

The reasons EOC scores were not available could be contributed to several factors, including the inconsistent implementation of EOC assessments throughout the district and the lack of uploaded EOC scores into Milepost, both of which resulted in the unavailability of EOC scores. The implementation of EOC scores was quite sporadic from 2009 to 2011; however, from 2011 to 2012, this practice improved dramatically as a result of pay for performance. Unfortunately, most scores are unavailable in Milepost, including those that were once available from 2011 to 2012. This was reported to district office personnel, which included the superintendent, assistant superintendent, and secondary curriculum director, for hopeful resolution in the future.

## **Discussion**

The first question from the second round of interview questions required revision because it addressed the adoption of a 4-day school week. Initially, the first question stated, “The basic themes that emerged from the first round of interviews include . . . Do you agree or disagree with the various comments, suggestions, or themes? Explain.” The actual question stated, “We are considering going to a 4-day week next year. This would entail going to school from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., Monday through Thursday, as opposed to going from 8:00 a.m. to 2:40 p.m., Monday through Friday. Do you think that would be a good idea or a bad idea? Explain.” This revision took place to enhance the quality of responses and to assist with the quick turnaround from the first and second round of interview questions.



The researcher discovered how the fifth question from the second round of interviews did not extract desired responses or dialogue anticipated. Unfortunately, this discovery did not become apparent during the five pilot studies. The fifth question posited asked, “What tools or skills would help you to be more successful in your current program? Explain.”

Study respondents elicited the following anomalies or outliers among the collective and individual responses, including the disclosed comments. In one instance, both the respondent and parent shared their frustration and breakdown in communication regarding the referral process to attend Span Academy. Neither knew nor understood why the move to Span Academy was the direct result from a failing grade in reading. Both shared how they spoke to the referring school principal and superintendent but not with the principal at Span Academy and thus, believed there was a disconnect in their understanding of options or opportunities. This type of communication breakdown supports the research of Type I alternative popular schools of choice similar to Span Academy, where enrollment procedures remain an option for students at risk of dropping out or being retained and who meet the eligibility criteria (Raywid, 1994; Cable, Plucker, & Spradin, 2009).

The realization that fewer students were transitioning each year, including those who achieved Level 5, indicated the vision and mission of Span Academy needed to be revisited. Some students would purposefully not meet a requirement for fear of being forced to transition. As a result, Span Academy truly became a 2-year intervention program, where the majority of students receive and require two full years at Span Academy in order to successfully transition and matriculate to a traditional high school.

Span Academy used the levels system as a measure of progress, accountability, and privileges. It not only recognizes student growth, but it is a great motivational tool and one where

students are recognized by their peers. Students are expected to maintain a 95% attendance rate. This equates to missing three or fewer days per quarter. In addition, students are able to make up absences by attending after-school tutoring and after-school homework club sessions. For many students, poor attendance has become routine, which creates a challenging obstacle to overcome. Academically, the expectations are for students to maintain a C average in all of their course work and ultimately receive no more than one write-up or disciplinary infraction per quarter. The levels system is a simple way to track students' misbehaviors, while providing incentives, encouragement, and recognition for progress. Finally, the expectation is for students to participate fully in service-learning projects and counseling sessions. Service-learning projects provide avenues for students to voluntarily give back to their community while learning a new skill, building self-esteem, and exploring self-discovery. The levels at the Span Academy are designed to provide feedback, establish accountability, and recognize quality effort and growth within the students' performance. In addition, those students who achieve Level 5 success are recognized with special attire, additional electives and privileges, and they also find that they have earned the respect of their peers. For a detailed description of the expectations per level, see the diagram below.

| <b>Requirements</b> | <b>Level 1</b>           | <b>Level 2</b>            | <b>Level 3</b>             | <b>Level 4</b>             | <b>Level 5</b>             |
|---------------------|--------------------------|---------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| <b>Time</b>         | Quarter 1<br>(1–8 weeks) | Quarter 2<br>(9–17 weeks) | Quarter 3<br>(18–26 weeks) | Quarter 4<br>(27–36 weeks) | Year 2<br>(53–72 weeks)    |
| <b>Attendance</b>   | 75% (6)                  | 80% (5)                   | 85% (4)                    | 90% (3)                    | 95% (2)                    |
| <b>Behavior</b>     | 5 write-ups              | 4 write-ups               | 3 write-ups                | 2 write-ups                | 1 write-up                 |
| <b>Academics</b>    | 3D 1C<br>(Core)          | 2D 2C<br>(Core)           | 1D 3C<br>(Core)            | 4C<br>(Core)               | Cs in all<br>classes       |
| <b>Outreach</b>     | 50%                      | 75%                       | 75%                        | 100%                       | 100%                       |
| <b>Counseling</b>   | Group                    | Group                     | Group                      | 1 Session<br>(Individual)  | 2 Sessions<br>(Individual) |

| <b>Interventions</b> | <b>Level 1</b> | <b>Level 2</b> | <b>Level 3</b> | <b>Level 4</b> | <b>Level 5</b>        |
|----------------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|----------------|-----------------------|
| <b>Core Labs</b>     | 1-2            | 1-2            | 1-2            | 1-2            | 0-1                   |
| <b>Electives</b>     | 0-4            | 0-4            | 0-4            | 0-4            | 2-4                   |
| <b>Incentives</b>    | None           | Eligible       | Eligible       | Eligible       | Eligible              |
| <b>Dress Code</b>    | Uniform        | Uniform        | Uniform        | Uniform        | Uniform<br>Sweatshirt |

Span Academy places a great deal of emphasis on their Outreach Program which prepared and equipped students to give back to their community, while modeling cooperation, communication, and relationship building among staff and peers. Within the outreach program, students volunteered at the animal shelter, Habitat for Humanity, Deseret Industries, and Mustard Seed. The students also cleaned up various parks and schools in the area, held free car washes for the general public, and read short stories to the elementary students. These types of programs are supported by the research of Payne and Edwards (2010).

The study also produced additional information that a limited number of Span Academy students would benefit from a faster paced program. The participants indicated the transition back to a traditional middle school or on to a traditional high school was difficult because of the faster pace. Implementing a faster pace for students in eighth grade, or for those students who have acquired Level 4, would better prepare them to matriculate or transition.

During the interview process, the researcher discovered how a seemingly common procedure to most traditional middle school students became a struggle for transitioning students. Isaac, in particular, shared that he went three weeks until he was finally able to use his assigned locker because he simply did not know how to use a combination lock. This indicated that to implement the use and practice of a combination lock would also better prepare students who transition.

Unanimously, the students suggested adding science and social studies to the core curriculum. Currently, core classes provided at Span Academy include math, language, reading, and science; however, for the participants in this study, only math, language, and reading were offered.

Additionally, not all students supported wearing a school uniform, and one felt it created some negativity toward the school. Isaac was not in favor of a school uniform, yet he did admit that it made getting ready for school much easier. Although a school uniform was supported by 70% of the participants, only 30% of the participants were required to wear a school uniform during their stay at Span Academy. This study took place between 2009 and 2011, and the first year a school uniform was adopted began in 2011.

## **Conclusions**

The following questions were asked of Span Academy students who achieved Level 5 and who transitioned to and matriculated in a traditional school in the district:

1. What were the experiences, successes, and struggles of students who successfully transitioned from the Span Academy to another school in the district?
2. What implemented practices led students to achieve Level 5 and complete Span Academy's program?
3. What feedback did the students who attended Span Academy offer to administrators about an alternative middle school setting based on their personal experiences?
4. What did the data indicate regarding attendance, GPA, and ISAT scores prior to entering and after completing Span Academy?

The questions were designed to elicit comprehensive responses from student participants in order to determine best practices in an alternative middle school environment via the

perceptions of former students who had successfully matriculated from the Span Academy. The researcher discovered this was quite challenging and required additional questioning strategies in order to elicit more elaborate and detailed responses from the participants.

Consistent with findings presented in the literature review (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002), all student respondents confirmed that the school district had referred them to Span Academy as a result of poor grades or disruptive behavior. This became clearly evident upon reviewing the students' historical grades, discipline log, and attendance records, as indicated in the literature review regarding an early warning system (Balfanz, 2011). Prior to attending Span Academy, all the students had failed at least one core class, and 90% had failed multiple core classes or summer school.

With the exception of one respondent, all former student interviewees agreed that attending Span Academy or a program like Span Academy beginning in seventh grade or earlier would have been beneficial. Teddy felt this type of structure would have been helpful beginning as early as fifth grade. Isaac stated, "I definitely needed the one-on-one with the teachers; it was a better learning experience." Overall, the students indicated the smaller class sizes and increased one-on-one help from teachers provided the learning experience necessary for their success.

The Span Academy structure, consisting of small class sizes, a weekly counseling class, a levels system, recovery, service-learning projects, after-school tutoring, and weekly progress reports, along with the students' efforts, enabled the students to attain Level 5 and transition. All participants currently attend a traditional high school within the district and are earning credit toward high school graduation. In addition, 90% of the participants plan to attend college at either a 2- or 4-year school.

The weekly counseling sessions are a proactive approach to assist and teach students how to best deal with various challenges, such as bullying, peer pressure, and anger, along with gangs, drugs, and lack of respect. Counseling sessions begin a powerful opportunity for restorative practices and circles, where students can resolve conflict and learn various strategies to cope with a multitude of differing challenges in and out of school (Wachtel, O'Connell, & Wachtel, 2010). Recovery provides additional work time for students to complete missing or incomplete work. This typically is offered on two different Friday afternoons throughout the month.

Several students alluded to the transition back to a traditional school as being difficult due to the faster pace, less help, and lack of exposure to science and social studies. Yet, according to the student responses, their confidence, increased levels of accountability and communication skills, along with continued assistance from Span Academy staff, eased the hardship.

Most students willingly admitted their apprehension, nervousness, and scared feelings to attend Span Academy due to the poor reputation or stigma associated within an alternative school setting (Atkins, Hohnstein, & Roche, 2008; Unruh, Bullis, Todis, Waintrup, & Atkins, 2007). Fortunately, all the respondents grew to appreciate Span Academy, its vision, mission, and structure, along with its family-oriented environment. Isaac asserted, “[Span Academy] really made a difference and was a better learning experience;” “[Span Academy] taught you in a manner that was best for you and not the same for everybody.” Teddy noted, “[Span Academy] helped me turn in my homework.” Beth shared, “[Span Academy] helped me get better grades; encouraging.” Josh stated, “[Span Academy] helped me take accountability for what I’m doing,”

and Jake noted that his increased ability to communicate effectively with staff and peers contributed to his current success today.

A strict climate surfaced at Span Academy, according to the students. This resulted from the foundational structure that provided accountability. This conclusion derived from students' comments describing the academy's levels system, of which they had not experienced in any of their previous schools: a stringent 95% attendance requirement, a discipline system with no more than one write-up allowed per quarter, a GPA of a C or higher, 100% participation in all outreach activities, mandated after-school tutoring, school uniform, mandated parent-teacher student-led conferences held quarterly, weekly progress reports that required a parent's signature confirming the parent had been notified, and a weekly counseling classes. This structured environment incorporated a levels system aligned with the research and findings by Gilson (2006), Tobin and Sprague (1999), and Van Acker (2007).

When asked about the differences between Span Academy and their previous schools, student respondents referenced the following general insights, including, but not limited to, more one-on-one help, smaller class sizes, and better relationships with teachers and peers. This aligns with the findings from Unruh, Bullis, Todis, Waintrup, and Atkins (2007), Senese and Arnold (2010), Schwerdt and West (2011), and San Antonio, Marcell, Tieken, and Wiener (2011), who concluded that important considerations for all educators in alternative settings included small class sizes and a school climate and environment that instill structure, safety, relationship building, student growth, and accountability. Recovery, after-school tutoring, school uniforms, and mandated parent-teacher student-led conferences held quarterly also contributed to the theme of accountability.

Teachers encouraged the students to work hard and held them to high standards, which contributed to the students' success. Frequent comments from both respondents and parents supported this overarching theme of accountability along with the Academy motto, "Commit 2 Graduate." A few of these comments included, "Teachers really pushed me even when I transitioned back." "[They] helped me take accountability for what I'm doing." One father noted, "[Span] Academy provided more accountability for Jake. Prior to [Span Academy], he thought school was a joke." Recurring positive comments included fewer students in the school, more one-on-one assistance, weekly progress reports, and a levels system, which all attributed to the structure and accountability necessary for the students' success.

Relationship development is the second of the two overarching themes revealed in the 20 interview questions. Limited student enrollment, small class sizes, and a paraprofessional in every classroom created an environment that offered more one-on-one help between student and teacher and student and paraprofessional than the students had previously received in a traditional middle school setting. Small-group learning sessions, advisory, and outreach provided avenues for students to build rapport, to improve communication skills, and to increase self-confidence.

The students raved about the teachers, and the commonalities invoked responses, such as "They were nice; they were really helpful; they were wonderful; they were really cool; they were awesome and encouraging;" and finally, "I loved them." These are comments that clearly indicate students had established a solid relationship and strong rapport with their teachers, best depicted in a quote from Jenny's mom, "The teachers here were golden; they were the key to the whole experience."



Thirty-one interventions were introduced to the respondents as part of the interview protocol, and the six most recognized and beneficial interventions cited by the students included extra help from teachers and paraprofessionals, and outreach programs along with small class sizes, weekly progress reports, and recovery practices. This foundational structure allowed for the two overarching themes of accountability and relationships to prevail. In addition, 90% of the respondents disclosed they would have benefitted from attending Span Academy or a similar program beginning in seventh grade or earlier.

Student respondents overwhelmingly identified the same interventions and practices had contributed to their success, which included small class sizes; caring, supporting, and encouraging staff; an outreach program; accountability; a levels system; and weekly progress reports; all of which were consistent with the research findings (Atkins, Hohnstein, & Roche, 2008; Unruh, Bullis, Todis, Waintrup, & Atkins, 2007).

When asked, “What did the Span Academy do or offer that helped you become successful?” the responses identified caring, encouraging, nice, and helpful staff members, who provided more one-on-one help and support and required greater accountability than the students had previously experienced. Span Academy’s outreach program, which links the classroom and instructional experiences to the community, was valued and supported by both the students and the research (Leone & Drakeford, 1999; Raywid, 2001; Wilson, Stemp, & McGinty, 2011).

According to Unruh, Bullis, Todis, Waintrup, and Atkins (2007), alternative education settings carry a stigma, which also surfaced from the participants in this study. Mostly, this stemmed from the reputation Span Academy had and from what they had heard prior to attending Span Academy. Several had heard it was a school for delinquent or “bad” students and therefore, many were apprehensive, scared, and nervous to attend.

The data compilation, including both the subjective responses of the students and the quantitative data, points directly to the success of Span Academy's working premise for alternative middle school success. Primarily, Span Academy is governed and guided by a framework of structure premised upon two overarching themes: accountability and relationships. Student respondents echoed repeatedly the culmination of both the accountability practices and the ongoing building of relationships among both peers and staff as key to their individual triumph.

Essential to the reliability of the students' responses is the correlation between student responses and quantifiable academic success (e.g., students averaged 26 fewer absences while attending Span Academy than during their previous school year). This was a result of the academy's levels system that required a 95% attendance rate or better in order to achieve Level 5 and transition. GPA scores improved 1.5 points in language and 1.3 points in math, using a 4-point scale. ISAT scores in language, math, and reading improved eight, 13, and 11 points respectively, an improvement equal to two and three years of growth (see Table 1).

This study aligned with the researcher findings of Senese and Arnold (2010), Schwerdt and West (2011), and San Antonio, Marcell, Tieken, and Wiener (2011), who noted that important considerations for the educational landscape for all educators in a discretionary setting include small class sizes and flexibility. These researchers also identified transitional support, school climate and environment, enrollment criteria, the cost effectiveness of programs, student growth, and accountability as part of the overall design.

Shirley (2009) noted the five most pressing needs among at-risk students, which include habituating classrooms and schools, marketable and practical skill-building courses, caring

teachers and administrators, small nontraditional classes, and academic life and social skills classes. All or most of these outside research findings were incorporated at Span Academy.

The questions enabled participants to reflect on their personal experiences, practices, and interventions at Span Academy. The summation of all student responses, coupled with quantitative data, will enable Span Academy and other middle school administrators the opportunity to fine-tune structural changes that implement two overarching themes of accountability and relationships, in order to develop best practices at the middle school level.

The findings from this research should impact school district policy and practices, considering the need for accountability, relationships, and school connectedness that drives success. Is the end point establishing more alternative schools with these characteristics or is the end point to incorporate these kinds of student supports and best practices in the mainstream schools? This is a critical issue; typically the only way students get help in our present system is to fail. In addition, staff development and training regarding discipline policies and practices need to be revisited. For example, suspensions do great harm and remove a student from the classroom. Educators must do a better job and get more creative in assigning consequences that are appropriate and not detrimental to student learning. Students at risk typically already battle chronic absenteeism, poor grades, and behavioral issues.

### **Recommendations for Further Research**

The collective research in an alternative middle school setting for implementing best practices speaks directly to structure. The two, key components are accountability and relationships. Additional research determining the correlation between these two components and implementation of programs that promote both could prove favorable to alternative schools.

This dissertation focused on students who achieved Level 5 and transitioned to a traditional school in the district. A study focusing entirely on students who did not achieve Level 5 or did not matriculate along with their peers or failed to complete the program could prove beneficial. Questions designed to elicit student responses regarding what went wrong and what needed to occur in order to stay in school, matriculate, and graduate would be intriguing.

A longitudinal study that tracks students five to 10 years beyond Span Academy would provide additional insights, consideration, and evaluation. Where are they, what are they doing, and what path did they choose? Not only could this type of study provide insight as to how to better prepare students but also address the question, are current alternative middle school practices effective?

One could also conduct a gender-specific study. Why are there more males than females attending alternative programs? Are there gender-specific needs that are not being met? A study reviewing family dynamics and parental involvement may elucidate gender-specific needs and family dynamics that lead to a better understanding of effective implementation of alternative schools and best practices.

Additionally, a study that simply reviewed, compared, and analyzed the early warning signs for a specific group of students enrolling in alternative middle schools may lead to earlier intervention, decreased dropout rates, and increased matriculation and graduation rates. Early warning systems have indicated excessive absences of 20 or more, and failing grades in math or language or a failing average in math, language, science, and social studies are key indicators. This information could be used to inform administrators, teachers, and parents precisely how to identify students at risk.

Policy-making practices could be enhanced by additional comprehensive research of all programs that promote the two key components of accountability and relationship. Two practices that warrant investigation involve the implementation and tracking of EOC scores in Milepost. Unfortunately, these scores were not available for this investigation. A second consideration regarding ongoing research would be to determine if district practices and policies in regard to in-school or out-of-school suspensions effect the learning, matriculation, and graduation rate of at-risk students.

### **Implications for Professional Practice**

This research has added to the literature governing best practices in an alternative middle school setting in that it has confirmed the necessity of an overarching structure of accountability and relationship within alternative middle schools. Additionally, a better understanding of needs, supports, and accountability factors can help alternative schools with their vision, purpose, and professional development needs. This study also revealed the need to push students harder and to adhere to a faster pace in eighth grade to better prepare students for a traditional high school.

Research has demonstrated a strong relationship between school connectedness and educational outcomes (Blum, 2005). Avenues for additional research, training, and implementation include teacher training on family dynamics, socioeconomic structures, and the cultural differences that invariably accompany alternative school students. Training for teachers and administrators in early warning signs indicative of school failure would augment the ability of alternative schools to enhance and implement effective alternative school curricula and programs.

Variable training could emphasize the pillars of structural success and reinforce the progress within the schools via school connectedness, providing teachers and staff with the

knowledge to increase overall student success. Additional training could very well provide strategies for increasing protective factors among youth that would better assist teachers and administrators in promoting social and academic health and productivity.

This study confirmed, but did not add to, the existing large body of research already compiled about effective school practices for at-risk students. Why these proven practices supported by research are not being incorporated into mainstream educational settings to ensure student success prior to failure should be considered.

Primarily, the Span Academy model incorporates intense intervention strategies for students after failing, rather than preventing failure initially. Further research is recommended to determine what practices mainstream educational settings can implement to prevent or reduce the amount of students who need alternative placements. Protocols and practices that provide an earlier recognition of at-risk students would enable traditional schools to transition those at-risk students to programs with comprehensive structural boundaries emphasizing accountability and relationships. The first step in this research process is to determine whether or not educators in mainstream schools recognize the early warning signs in at-risk students. The second step in this process is to determine best practices in educating educators to recognize the early warning signs of at-risk students. The next step is to implement transitional classroom programs that provide structural boundaries for at-risk students, while maintaining their individual and collective position as students in the mainstream classroom. The conclusion of this study concurs with other research that we do not have the necessary understanding of blending at-risk students with students who are not at risk, while maintaining an educational structure that adequately meets the educational needs of both.

Comprehensive research is needed to determine whether or not mainstream educators, given all of their other responsibilities and duties, can identify at-risk students. The results of this initial research will determine if mainstream schools can be proactive in preventing an additional number of students being placed in alternative schools or if remedial alternative school education is the best avenue for at-risk students. Further investigation should be undertaken to determine what supports should be in place so that students exiting from an alternative school setting are more successful in their mainstream placements.

Additionally, this research revealed that alternative middle schools, like Span Academy, contrary to the original design as a transition school, are better served as a 2-year intervention program, in that the research revealed that fewer students transitioned as of 2009 to present, and most preferred to remain at Span Academy through their eighth-grade year. Accordingly, Span Academy redesigned their program from a typical transition school to a comprehensive 2-year intervention program. Therefore, in an effort to produce a viable program that enhances both amiability and interconnectedness within Span Academy, this research may well lead to improved scores, matriculation, and overall success district wide.

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## Appendix A

### Confederate Telephone Call Script

Hi. My name is \_\_\_\_\_, I am the Human Relations Director for the Twin Falls School District, and I'm calling on behalf of Bridge Academy Principal Jim Brown.

Principal Brown is currently a doctoral student at Northwest Nazarene and is engaged in conducting a doctoral study entitled, *Best Practices in an Alternative Setting From a Student's Perspective*. As you may be aware, Principal Brown is a strong advocate for alternative education and is actively engaged in promoting best practices, programs, and curricula that will make alternative education a viable and effective program for countless students whose needs are not adequately met in traditional schools.

It is his desire to pursue ongoing research that will enable alternative schools to provide both opportunity and excellence for the students they serve. In order to do so, he could use your help with this study. Your son/daughter meets the eligibility criteria to be interviewed two times for Principal Brown's study. The time commitment will last no longer than 90 minutes total and your son/daughter can choose from a list of public locations to be interviewed. Those present will be the researcher, participant, and the staff at each public location. If you are interested in helping, does Principal Brown have your permission to contact you via phone to enable you and/or your child to participate in his doctoral study?

Please note your information and participation will be kept entirely confidential. Similarly, participation is solely voluntary and there will be no repercussions upon you and/or your student for either participation or nonparticipation in this study.

Thank you so much for your time.

With your agreement, Principal Brown will be contacting you in the near future. Please confirm the best time to call and the best number to use.

Thanks again!

## **Appendix B**

### **Assent Form**

#### **A. PURPOSE AND BACKGROUND**

Jim R. Brown, EdS, a doctoral student in Educational Leadership at Northwest Nazarene University, is conducting a research study related to best practices in an alternative middle school setting from a student's perspective. Over 600,000 students attend alternative schools every year, and the researcher hopes to help pave the way to determine what strategies or practices provide the best results. The purpose of this study is to determine what strategies or practices are most utilized and most effective at the middle school level in an alternative setting. This study aims to compare best practices from a student's perspective while also analyzing data prior to Span Academy and after completing the program. The study will be looking for commonalities in the perceptions from all stakeholders. We appreciate your involvement in helping advance this line of research.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have successfully transitioned from Span Academy and are currently enrolled in the district.

#### **B. PROCEDURES**

If you agree to be in the study, the following will occur:

1. You will be asked to sign an Assent Form, volunteering to participate in the study.
2. You will meet with Jim R. Brown, primary researcher, twice for a primary and follow-up interview and will be asked a series of questions about your experiences at Span Academy and specific practices that best assisted in your successful transition. The interviews will be audio taped and member checking will take place in order to assure they are valid and accurate. These procedures will be completed at a location mutually decided upon by the participant and principal investigator and will take a total time of about 90 minutes.
3. You will be asked to complete Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Survey, which is a survey designed to address learning styles. This survey should take approximately 15–20 minutes.
4. You will be asked to reply to an e-mail or phone conversation at the conclusion of the study, asking you to confirm the data that was gathered during the research process.

#### **C. RISKS/DISCOMFORTS**

1. Some of the interview questions may make you uncomfortable or upset, but you are free to decline to answer any questions you do not wish to answer or to stop participation at any time.
2. Confidentiality: Participation in research may involve a loss of privacy; however, your records will be handled as confidentially as possible. No individual identities will be used in any reports or publications that may result from this study. All data from notes, audio tapes, and disks will be kept in a locked file cabinet in the Department and the key to the cabinet will be kept in a separate location. In compliance with the federal-wide Assurance

Code, data from this study will be kept for three years, after which all data from the study will be destroyed (45 CFR 46.117).

#### **D. BENEFITS**

There will be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study. However, the information you provide may help educators to better understand the strategies or practices for an effective alternative middle school program.

#### **E. PAYMENTS**

There are no payments for participating in this study.

#### **F. QUESTIONS**

If you have questions or concerns about participation in this study, you should first talk with the researcher. Jim R. Brown can be contacted via e-mail at brownji@tfsd.org, via telephone at 208-737-5282(W), or by writing: Jim R. Brown, Span Academy, Twin Falls School District #411, 616 Eastland Dr., Twin Falls, Idaho, 83301. If for some reason you do not wish to do this, you may contact Dr. Mike Poe, Doctoral Committee Chair at Northwest Nazarene University, via e-mail at empoe@nnu.edu, via telephone at 208-467-8429, or by writing: 623 S. University Blvd., Nampa, Idaho, 83686. Should you feel distressed due to participation in this, you should contact your own health care provider.

#### **G. ASSENT**

You will be given a copy of this assent form to keep.

**PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH IS VOLUNTARY.** You are free to decline to be in this study or to withdraw from it at any point. Your decision as to whether or not to participate in this study will have no influence on your present or future status as a student in the Twin Falls School District.

*I give my consent to participate in this study:*

---

Signature of Study Participant

Date

*I give my consent for the interview and discussion to be audio taped in this study:*

---

Signature of Study Participant

Date

*I give my consent for direct quotes to be used in this study: Note—(Pseudonyms will be used even with direct quotes)*

---

Signature of Study Participant

Date

---

**Signature of Person Obtaining Assent**

**Date**

**THE NORTHWEST NAZARENE UNIVERSITY HUMAN RESEARCH REVIEW  
COMMITTEE HAS REVIEWED THIS PROJECT FOR THE PROTECTION OF HUMAN  
PARTICIPANTS IN RESEARCH.**

## Appendix C

### Informed Consent Form (Parent[s])

*DATE*

Dear Parents,

This year, I have the opportunity to conduct a research study with your child and his or her classmates as a part of my graduate program at Northwest Nazarene University. The benefits that may result from the research are: reduced dropout rate, more students graduating, and strategies that produce results for students enrolled in alternative middle school programs. The study has been reviewed by the Research Review Committee at Northwest Nazarene University and has been officially approved.

The procedures are as follows:

- The research project will take place between September 2012 and November 2012.
- Two, face-to-face interviews will be conducted that will last no longer than 90 minutes total.
- Students will also be asked to complete Howard Gardner's Multiple Intelligences Survey on learning styles.
- Data will be collected in the form of interviews and quantitative data prior to attending Span Academy and after successfully completing the program including attendance, gender, grade point average (GPA), current school, end-of-course assessment scores, and Idaho Standard Achievement Test (ISAT) scores from 2009 thru 2013.
- Participation will involve a combination of these data collection instruments and techniques.

I anticipate that there is minimal risk involved for your child's learning over the course of the study.

Your child's participation in this project is completely voluntary. In addition to your permission, your child will also be asked if he or she would like to take part in this project. Any child may stop participating in the study at any time. The choice to participate or not will not impact your child's grades or status at any school in the Twin Falls School District.

All information that is obtained during this research project will be kept strictly secure and will not become a part of your child's school record. The results of this study may be used for a research paper and presentation. Pseudonyms or codes will be substituted for the names of children and the school. This helps protect confidentiality.

In the space at the bottom of this letter, please indicate whether you do or do not want your child to participate in this project. The second copy is to keep for your records. If you have any questions about this research study, please feel free to contact me either by e-mail at

brownji@tfsd.org, telephone 208-737-5282 or mail, Bridge Academy, Attn: Jim Brown, 616 Eastland Dr., Twin Falls, Idaho, 83301. Please keep a copy of this form for your records.

The results of my research will be available after August 1, 2013. If you would like to have a copy of the results or if you have any questions, please contact me at 208-737-5282 or my Committee Chair, Dr. Mike Poe, at 208-467-8429 or empoe@nnu.edu.

Sincerely,

Jim R. Brown  
Twin Falls School District #411  
208-737-5282  
brownji@tfsd.org

\*\*\*\*\*

I have read this form. I understand that nothing negative will happen if I do not let my child participate. I know that I can stop his/her participation at any time. I voluntarily agree to let my child participate in this study as follows:

YES, \_\_\_\_\_ may participate in this study.

NO, \_\_\_\_\_ may NOT participate in this study.

Child's printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian printed name: \_\_\_\_\_

Parent/Guardian signature: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_



## Appendix D

### Interview Questions

1. Do you remember the attendance policy we had at the Span Academy? What do you remember? What are your thoughts regarding the attendance policy? Explain.
2. What were the differences between Span Academy and your previous school(s)? Explain.
3. Do you remember the levels system or phase system? Explain.
4. Do you remember the outreach program or service-learning program? What do you remember? What are your thoughts regarding the outreach program or service-learning program? Explain.
5. If we were to continue to have outreach or service-learning projects, what new or additional projects would you recommend we implement? Why?
6. Did you wear a school uniform while attending the Span Academy? If yes, how do you feel about the school uniform? If no, what do you think about requiring a school uniform? Why? Would that have affected your decision to attend the school? Explain.
7. I consider you a successful student because you achieved Level 5, transitioned to another school in the district, you haven't dropped out, and you are still earning credits toward graduation. What did the Span Academy do or offer that has helped you become successful? Why?
8. Do you remember when and why you and your parents initially decided you would attend Span Academy? Do you think it would have been beneficial if you had started the Span Academy or a program like Span Academy sooner? Explain.
9. If you could change, add, or eliminate something about the Span Academy, what would it be? Why?

10. An intervention is defined as a method or strategy to help one understand or master the concept. Please place a check by all the interventions at the Span Academy that contributed to your success along with a brief explanation as to why it helped.

- Small class size
- Block schedule
- Levels or phases
- Classroom management plan (school safety or school rules)
- School uniform
- Advisory
- 8 computers in every room
- Interactive white board and projector in every classroom
- Teachers
- Paraprofessional in every classroom
- Electives life-time skills, art, student council, technology, Ping-Pong, dance, martial arts, etc.
- Schedule (length of day, classes offered, etc.)
- After-school tutoring (M–W)
- After-school homework club (computer lab)
- Recovery—90 minutes every Friday to make up work or complete missing work
- WISE—work in lieu of suspension or expulsion
- Behavior success plans—behavior contract created with principal when a student accrued 7–10 write-ups
- Behavior Action Team (BAT)
- Status offender referral
- Student council
- Raft trip
- Ropes course
- Quarterly incentives (i.e., Kiwi Loco, Bowladrome, Frisbee golf, etc.)
- Service learning/outreach (paint school, animal shelter, Habitat for Humanity, elementary schools, etc.)
- Agenda books
- Weekly progress reports
- Guest speakers
- Counseling class once per week
- Student-led parent–teacher conferences held quarterly
- Field trips
- Facilities—portables
- Other

## Appendix E

### Interview Questions:

The second round of research questions for this study will consist of:

1. We are considering going to a 4-day week next year. This would entail going to school from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., M–Th as opposed from going from 8:00 a.m. to 2:40 p.m., M–F. Do you think that would be a good idea or a bad idea? Explain.
2. What was your first impression when you came to the Span Academy? If student says it was hard, ask what was it that made it difficult? Explain. If student liked it, ask, what was it that made you like the Span Academy? Explain.
3. Where did you go after you left the Span Academy? How would you describe that transition? Explain. What would have made it better? Explain.
4. What program or school are you currently attending? What do you like about this school that we didn't offer at Span Academy? What did you like at Span Academy that you don't have at your current school? Explain.
5. What tools or skills would help you to be more successful in your current program? Explain.
6. Without mentioning names, tell me your thoughts about the teachers at Span Academy.
7. What do you hope to do or accomplish in the next five years? Explain.
8. If you had the job of greeting or meeting with each new student who was going to be coming to the Span Academy, what advice would you give them before they started school? Explain.
9. If you were going to create an advertisement for the Span Academy to convince students to attend, what would you say? Explain.
10. If your cousin was considering attending the Span Academy and asked you what was bad about Span Academy, what would you say? Explain.

## Appendix F

### Interview Observation Form

|  |  |
|--|--|
| Date/Time  |  |
| Setting  |  |
| 1. Do you remember the attendance policy we had at the Span Academy? What do you remember? What are your thoughts regarding the attendance policy? Explain.                            |  |
| 2. What were the differences between Span Academy and your previous school(s)? Explain.  |  |
| 3. Do you remember the levels system or phase system? Explain.   |  |
| 4. Do you remember the Outreach Program or Service Learning Program? What do you remember? What are your thoughts regarding the Outreach Program or Service Learning Program? Explain. |  |
| 5. If we were to continue to have outreach or service learning projects, what new or additional projects would you recommend we implement? Why?  |  |
| 6. Did you wear a school uniform while attending Span Academy? If yes, how do you feel about the school uniform? If no, what do you think about requiring a school                     |  |

|   |  |
|---|--|
| <p>uniform? Why? Would that have affected your decision to attend the school? Explain.</p>  |  |
| <p>7. I consider you a successful student because you achieved Level 5, transitioned to another school in the district, you haven't dropped out, and you are still earning credits toward graduation. What did Span Academy do or offer that has helped you become successful? Why?</p> |  |
| <p>8. Do you remember when and why you and your parents initially decided you would attend Span Academy? Do you think it would have been beneficial if you had started the Span Academy or a program like Span Academy sooner? Explain.</p>   |  |
| <p>9. If you could change, add, or eliminate something about Span Academy, what would it be? Why?</p>   |  |
| <p>10. An intervention is defined as a method or strategy to help one understand or master the concept. Please place a check by all the interventions at the Span Academy that contributed to your success along with a brief explanation as to why it helped.</p>                      | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Small class size</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Block schedule</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Levels or phases</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Classroom management plan</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> School uniform</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Advisory</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> 8 computers in every room</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Interactive white board and projector in every classroom</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Teachers</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Paraprofessional in every classroom</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Electives</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Schedule</li> </ul> |

|   |  |
|---|--|
|   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> After-school tutoring</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> After-school homework club (computer lab)</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> WISE</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Behavior success plans</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Status offender referral</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Student council</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Raft trip</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Ropes course</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Quarterly incentives</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Service learning/outreach</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Agenda books</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Weekly progress reports</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Guest speakers</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Counseling once per week</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> BAT (Behavior Action Team)—staff would meet and discuss student progress each week</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Student-led parent–teacher conferences held quarterly</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Field trips</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Facilities—portables</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Other</li> </ul> |
| <p>11. We are considering going to a 4-day week next year. This would entail going to school from 8:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m., M–Th as opposed to going from 8:00 a.m. to 2:40 p.m., M–F. Do you think that would be a good idea or a bad idea? Explain.</p> |  |
| <p>12. What was your first impression when you came to Span Academy? If students says it was hard, ask, what was it that made it difficult? Explain. If student liked it, ask, what was it that made you like Span Academy? Explain.</p>                |  |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| <p>13. Where did you go after you left Span Academy? How would you describe that transition? Explain. What would have made it better? Explain.</p>   |  |
| <p>14. What program or school are you currently attending? What do you like about this school that we didn't offer at Span Academy? What did you like at Span Academy that you don't have at your current school? Explain.</p> |  |
| <p>15. What tools or skills would help you to be more successful in your current program? Explain.</p>   |  |
| <p>16. Without mentioning names, tell me your thoughts about the teachers at Span Academy.</p>   |  |
| <p>17. What do you hope to do or accomplish in the next five years? Explain.</p>   |  |
| <p>18. If you had the job of greeting or meeting with each new student who was going to be coming to the Span Academy, what advice would you give them before they started school? Explain.</p>                                |  |
| <p>19. If you were going to create an advertisement for the Span Academy to convince students to attend, what would you say? Explain.</p>  |  |
| <p>20. If your cousin was considering attending the Span Academy and asked you what was bad</p>  |  |

|  |  |
|--|--|
| about the Span Academy,<br>what would you say?<br>Explain. |  |
|--|--|



## Appendix G

### Attendance Records Before and After Attending Span Academy

Table 5

| Student Name | Before Span | After Span |
|--------------|-------------|------------|
| Student 1    | 38          | 15         |
| Student 2    | 16          | 4          |
| Student 3    | 32          | 0          |
| Student 4    | 21          | 16         |
| Student 5    | 3           | 2          |
| Student 6    | 6           | 4          |
| Student 7    | 74          | 9          |
| Student 8    | 8           | 8          |
| Student 9    | 13          | 3          |
| Student 10   | 12          | 9          |
| Student 11   | 11          | 3          |
| Student 12   | 159         | 51         |
| Student 13   | 14          | 8          |
| Student 14   | 125         | 52         |
| Student 15   | 19          | 6          |
| Student 16   | 9           | 2          |
| Student 17   | 86          | 12         |

Source: District data retrieved from PowerSchool 2009–2012.

## Appendix H

### Former Span Academy Students

#### ISAT Scores Before and After Attending Span Academy

Table 6

| Student Name | ISAT<br>Score<br>Before | ISAT<br>Score<br>Before | ISAT<br>Score<br>Before | ISAT<br>Score<br>After | ISAT<br>Score<br>After | ISAT<br>Score<br>After |
|--------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|-------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|------------------------|
|              | Reading                 | Math                    | Language                | Reading                | Math                   | Language               |
| Student 1    | 227                     | 220                     | 222                     | 224                    | 229                    | 217                    |
| Student 2    | 204                     | 217                     | 213                     | 226                    | 236                    | 219                    |
| Student 3    | 198                     | 213                     | 199                     | 219                    | 239                    | 226                    |
| Student 4    | 234                     | 223                     | 223                     | 234                    | 234                    | 217                    |
| Student 5    | 247                     | 236                     | 230                     | 242                    | 247                    | 236                    |
| Student 6    | 243                     | 229                     | 243                     | 272                    | 243                    | 245                    |
| Student 7    | 209                     | 213                     | 202                     | 222                    | 227                    | 217                    |
| Student 8    | 205                     | 213                     | 211                     | 224                    | 235                    | 215                    |
| Student 9    | 212                     | 217                     | 215                     | 228                    | 238                    | 228                    |
| Student 10   | 204                     | 213                     | 209                     | 216                    | 231                    | 221                    |
| Student 11   | 206                     | 213                     | 202                     | 225                    | 231                    | 219                    |
| Student 12   | 198                     | 222                     | 213                     | 201                    | 230                    | 212                    |
| Student 13   | 209                     | 224                     | 218                     | 221                    | 222                    | 223                    |
| Student 14   | 214                     | 229                     | 209                     | 215                    | 228                    | 227                    |
| Student 15   | 201                     | 218                     | 213                     | 219                    | 230                    | 213                    |

|            |     |     |     |     |     |     |
|------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|
| Student 16 | 223 | 208 | 223 | 227 | 218 | 234 |
| Student 17 | 207 | 212 | 204 | 219 | 225 | 215 |

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Source: District data retrieved from PowerSchool 2009–2012.

## Appendix I

### Former Span Academy Students' Grades Before and at Transitioning

Table 7

| Student Name | Math Prior | English Prior | Math at Transition | English at Transition |
|--------------|------------|---------------|--------------------|-----------------------|
| Student 1    | 1          | 0             | 2                  | 3                     |
| Student 2    | 1          | 1             | 3                  | 2                     |
| Student 3    | 1          | 2             | 1                  | 3                     |
| Student 4    | 0          | 1             | 2                  | 2                     |
| Student 5    | 0          | 1             | 1                  | 3                     |
| Student 6    | 2          | 4             | 3                  | 4                     |
| Student 7    | 0          | 2             | 2                  | 2                     |
| Student 8    | 1          | 1             | 2                  | 2                     |
| Student 9    | 0          | 1             | 1                  | 3                     |
| Student 10   | 0          | 2             | 2                  | 2                     |
| Student 11   | 0          | 0             | 1                  | 3                     |
| Student 12   | 2          | 1             | 2                  | 3                     |
| Student 13   | 1          | 1             | 3                  | 3                     |
| Student 14   | 0          | 0             | 1                  | 3                     |
| Student 15   | 0          | 1             | 3                  | 1                     |
| Student 16   | 0          | 0             | 2                  | 3                     |
| Student 17   | 0          | 0             | 1                  | 2                     |

Source: District data retrieved from PowerSchool 2009–2012.

| <u>GPA Scale</u> |
|------------------|
| A = 4.0          |
| B = 3.0          |
| C = 2.0          |
| D = 1.0          |
| F = 0.0          |

**Appendix J**  
**Interventions Utilized**

Table 8

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|                                 |
|---------------------------------|
| Small Class Size                |
| Block Schedule                  |
| Phases/Levels                   |
| Classroom Management Plan       |
| Uniform                         |
| Advisory Class                  |
| 8 Computers in Every Class      |
| Interactive White Board         |
| Teachers                        |
| Paraprofessional in Every Class |
| Electives                       |
| Schedule                        |
| After-school Tutoring           |
| After-school Homework Club      |
| Recovery                        |
| Wise                            |
| Behavior Success Plan           |
| Status Offender Referral        |
| Student Council                 |
| Raft Trip                       |
| Ropes Course                    |
| Quarterly Incentives            |
| Outreach Program                |
| Agenda Books                    |
| Weekly Progress Reports         |
| Math and Language Labs          |
| Guest Speaker                   |
| Counseling Once per Week        |
| BAT                             |
| Parent–Teacher Conferences      |
| Facilities                      |

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**Appendix K**  
**Member Checking**

Date

Dear---

Thank you for your participation in the study this past semester. I have called for two reasons: first, to share with you the themes that resulted from the interviews of all participants and specifically, to assure your comments were accurately depicted in our conversation. Secondly, I would also like to send you a \$10 gift certificate to Java in appreciation of your time and valued feedback regarding this dissertation. Do you have 10 to 15 minutes to confirm your responses have been accurately recorded?

Excellent.

[outline themes]

Do you have any suggestions or additional information you wanted to share?

Thank you again for your help, and please confirm I have the correct mailing address for your gift certificate.

Jim R. Brown  
Doctoral Student  
Northwest Nazarene University  
jimbrown@nnu.edu  
Telephone: 208-737-5282  
HRRC Approval# 792059