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Alternative Pathways: Investigating the Use
of Independent Study as a Means
to Dropout Recovery and College Preparation

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction of the
Requirements for the degree Doctor of Education

by

Christopher Oleks

2015

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Alternative Pathways: Investigating the Use
of Independent Study as a Means
to Dropout Recovery and College Preparation

by

Christopher Oleks

Doctor of Education

University of California, Los Angeles, 2015

Professor Christina A. Christie, Chair

This study examined the impact of an independent study-based curricular design as a means of recovering dropped out youth and preparing them to succeed in postsecondary settings. The study focused on a dropout recovery program located in a large, urban public school district. The program offered dropouts a reduced-credit, faster-track pathway to a high school diploma. The study utilized a success case study design in order to examine three sites within the program that were highly successful at graduating students, and one that performed below the program average. The goals of the study were to learn why some sites were outperforming others within the program at graduating students, and whether there were common best practices employed at the strong performing sites. Additionally, the study sought to ascertain the impact of the

program on graduates who later pursued postsecondary educational offerings. Data were collected through interviews of staff and former graduates, site observations, as well as examinations of program documents. I compared data gathered at the success case sites and the underperforming site to identify commonalities between site practices and graduates' recollections of how the program impacted their academic trajectory. Chief among the findings were that staff at high performing sites within the program shared a core set of four common beliefs, out of which sprang a number of shared best practices. These beliefs and practices had arisen absent the influence of an overall programmatic design. In addition, the study found that the program had an extremely positive impact upon graduates. In particular, the program changed their views of education from highly negative to positive, and led to high levels of satisfaction in postsecondary settings, as well as high rates of persistence. My findings suggest that the implementation of independent study-based curriculum and reduced-credit pathways to a high school diploma should be examined carefully by school districts as a potentially highly successful means for addressing the nation's dropout crisis, but that care should be taken to ensure that program design and maintenance allows for top-tier performance.

The dissertation of Christopher Oleks is approved.

Patricia M. McDonough

Daniel G. Solorzano

Jorja Jean Manos Leap

Christina A. Christie, Committee Chair

University of California, Los Angeles

2015

DEDICATION PAGE

I wish to dedicate this manuscript to my parents, John Oleks and Judith Oleks, who taught me the value of, and took great care in providing me with, a phenomenal education. I am eternally thankful for all they have given me. In particular, I would like to note that without my mother's encouragement and support, this project would never have been undertaken. I wish she were here to read it, but I know she would be proud. I also wish to thank my wife Elizabeth, whose patience and support through this scholarly endeavor have been nothing short of astonishing to me. My mother may have inspired me to undertake this journey, but it was my wife that inspired me to complete it. You have my never-ending thanks. And finally, I wish to dedicate this manuscript to the amazing graduates of the Succeed Again program that shared their stories with me so willingly and openly. Their journeys, described in this manuscript, never cease to astonish and inspire.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION	ii
DEDICATION PAGE	v
TABLE OF CONTENTS.....	vi
VITA.....	viii
CHAPTER ONE.....	1
Background Information.....	1
The Problem.....	6
The Project.....	7
Research Design and Methods.....	8
Public Engagement	9
CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE.....	10
Dropout and Graduation in America: What the Numbers Tell Us About Where We Are Today, And Where We Have Been.....	10
The Costs of Dropping Out.....	15
What Makes a Dropout?	19
Signs of Danger.....	21
How Do We Help: What Have We Tried, and What Have We Learned?.....	26
Independent Study: A Way Forward?.....	28
CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY	33
Purpose of the Study.....	33
Study Design.....	34
Site Selection	35
Participants.....	37
Data Collection Methods	38
Data Analysis	40
Ethical Issues	41
Credibility	42
CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS.....	44
Success Case Study One: Benoit Succeed Again	45
Success Case Study Two: Booker Succeed Again	50
Success Case Study Three: Osborne Succeed Again.....	56

From Believing to Doing: What the High Performing Sites Taught Me.....	62
The First Belief: Graduation and Beyond is the Goal of the Program.....	63
The Second Belief: Strong Sites are Well Organized and Tightly Structured.....	71
The Third Belief: The Largest Challenge for Students is Life and Poor Educational Opportunities, Not Themselves	78
The Fourth Belief: Staff Should Work to Improve Their Own Sites, and the Program Should Follow Suit.....	84
The Graduates' Belief: Succeed Again Changes Student Perceptions of Education for the Better. It is a Viable and Necessary Pathway for College Success, but Can Do More	90
The Counter-Case: Chilton Succeed Again	98
Graduation and Beyond was Not Quite the Goal at Chilton Succeed Again.....	101
Some Chilton Staff Felt the Largest Challenge for Kids was Life and Not Themselves, and the Kids Noticed	107
Chilton Did Not Work as Hard Toward Site Improvement.....	110
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION.....	112
Discussion of the Belief that Graduation and Beyond is the Goal	113
Discussion of the Belief that Strong Sites are Team-Based, Well-Organized, Tightly Structured Settings	117
Discussion of the Belief that the Largest Challenge for Students Is Life and Poor Prior Educational Opportunities, not Themselves	120
Discussion of the Belief that Staff Should Work Hard to Improve Their Own Sites, and that the Program Should Follow Suit.....	123
Implications for Practice.....	125
Areas for Future Research	129
Limitations of the Study.....	131
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR HIGH PERFORMING SITES.....	133
APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR LOW PERFORMING SITES	155
APPENDIX C: CODING MAP.....	175
APPENDIX D: READING PRE-TEST SCORES	176
REFERENCES	177

VITA

Christopher Oleks has worked in urban education and the dropout recovery field for over fifteen years. He received his Bachelor of Arts from Williams College in Williamstown, Massachusetts in 1995, majoring in History. In 2000, he founded the Options Program, a partnership between K-12 and adult schools in Los Angeles that targeted dropped out youth or students highly at-risk of dropping out. He oversaw the growth of Options from an initial class of 26 students to a program that served over 650 students daily on multiple campuses. Thousands of students graduated from multiple, inner-city Los Angeles high schools because of help from the program. Christopher went on to work for additional Los Angeles dropout recovery projects, and has presented work concerning best practices in dropout recovery at numerous local and regional conferences. He currently works as the Director of Network Operations for Equitas Academy Charter Schools, a network of elementary and middle schools located in the Pico-Union neighborhood of Los Angeles.

CHAPTER ONE

Background Information

This study examined three branch locations of an independent study-based dropout recovery program in a large, urban school district located in the western United States. It sought to identify the best practices of teachers and counselors at program sites that produced large numbers of graduates and demonstrated strong student-retention rates. The study also examined the program's effectiveness at producing graduates prepared to succeed on the post-secondary academic level.

The study identified successful practices within the Chaparral Unified School District's Succeed Again program. Succeed Again is an independent study-based dropout recovery program enrolling high school dropouts and severely credit-deficient students, placing them on an alternative path to a high school diploma. While overall program data demonstrated strong performance, with over 1000 students graduating in recent years, performance measured by graduation and retention rates varied widely across the program's 26 sites. Some sites were extremely successful at retaining and graduating students while others were not.

Addressing the nation's dropout crisis is an increasingly vital task, as globalization and the information economy make high school completion and a college diploma more essential than ever, for both the individual student and the health of American society (Belfield, 2007a; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Unfortunately, researchers report the high school graduation rate has changed little, if at all, since 1970 (Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), and some studies report a rate as low as 60 percent (Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

The statistics framing America's dropout epidemic are sobering. Research reports that a student is kicked out or drops out of high school every 26 seconds, and that such incidents unevenly impact low-income, minority students (Noguera, 1995; Sipe, 2004). Dropping out has profound effects on their personal lives, the health of their communities and on the nation as a whole. High school dropouts earn, on average, \$300,000 less in their lifetime than a high school graduate, and this wage loss approaches \$1,000,000 when a dropout's earnings are compared to those of college graduates (Belfield, 2007a; C. E. Rouse, 2005; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). These decreased earnings of dropouts lower the nation's tax base. Annual losses exceed \$50 billion in state and federal taxes for all dropouts age 18-67 (Belfield, 2007a; Bridgeland et al., 2006; C. E. Rouse, 2005; Rumberger, 2011).

Various factors motivate students to drop out of school: family problems, substance abuse, high rates of poverty, living in an urban area and attending a public school, truancy, and delinquency comprise but a few warning signs that a student may be at risk of dropping out (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Dynarski et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Despite a plethora of evidence identifying *characteristics* shared by drop-outs, research cannot pinpoint an exact *cause* of why students leave school, as the process itself is a complex interplay of circumstances and characteristics (Rumberger, 2011). Researchers cite this complexity as a reason anti-dropout and dropout recovery interventions demonstrate a negligible impact on the dropout rate (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

The traditional option for students who drop out has been *pursuit of a GED certificate*. However, researchers criticize the lax academic standards of the test (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), indicate the simplicity and easy availability of the test may actually increase dropout behavior as students find this alternative path less onerous than the daily drudgery of attending school

(Dynarski et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), and find that the economic benefits of pursuing this certificate are limited (Belfield, 2007a; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Researchers also found to be ineffective *alternative schools*, created for students unsuccessful in traditional environments. Additional funds needed to operate alternative schools are constantly under threat from shrinking education budgets, a stigma is attached to these schools deterring students and parents from wanting to participate, and placing so many at-risk students together increases the presence of negative peer influences (Rumberger, 2011).

Dropout prevention programs, a third alternative, seek to increase school retention rates by early intervention with at-risk students. Research also finds these interventions unsuccessful. A 2006 study found only 3 of 197 programs examined had a positive effect on dropout rates (Rumberger, 2011).

Another method for tackling the nation's high dropout rate is *independent study-based dropout recovery*. This strategy has demonstrated positive, although small-scale impacts on graduation rates (Dynarski et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2011). Overall, research examining these interventions is scant, due both to the small number of these programs in existence and the generally limited scope of research into dropout recovery.

This study examined a dropout recovery program in a large, urban school district in the western United States that utilized an independent study-based curriculum and school. It sought to understand what program components lead to positive outcomes as measured by numbers of graduates and student retention rates. In addition, the study sought to ascertain how graduates of the Succeed Again program perceived the program's strengths and weaknesses in preparing them for post-secondary academic success. The rationale for the study was threefold: first, while the program produced large numbers of graduates in total, performance varied widely at its 26 sites.

Best practices identified by this study can be utilized to improve the Succeed Again program and increase graduation and student retention rates. Second, while the program declared a goal of creating graduates who are ready to succeed on the post-secondary level, it lacked a tool for measuring the success of this goal. This study aimed to utilize the voices and experiences of graduates who enrolled in college to provide a needed window into this crucial program goal. Finally, dropout recovery programs in general, and specifically independent study-based programs are under-researched (Dynarski et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009) and information regarding successes within these programs will prove helpful for districts and states seeking to lower their dropout rates.

Founded over twenty years ago, Chaparral's Succeed Again program enrolled dropouts and credit-deficient concurrent high school students who were generally between the ages of 16 to 18. The program had 26 sites spread across the district, each serving 100 to 130 students at a time. The model for dropout recovery was primarily independent study based, and was an attractive option for many dropouts due to the presence of the GED + 50 Path to Diploma program. This program provided a high school diploma to students who could pass 10 core curricular classes (each worth 5 credits, hence the 50), the GED and the state's High School Exit Exam. This model was quite lenient when compared to the requirements for a diploma from a traditional Chaparral Unified high school, where students must amass a minimum of 230 credits.

Students at a Succeed Again site were assigned to one of two teachers. They were given a minimum of 15 to 20 assignments that they must complete each week in order to remain in the program. If a student failed to turn in work, or make up past missed assignments for four straight weeks, they could be dismissed. They were required to meet with their teacher for a minimum of

15 minutes per week at the site, although some students spent more time at the physical location. The site also had a consultant, whose job it was to recruit, enroll and counsel students.

An unpublished, 2013 study of one Succeed Again site (Oleks, 2013) illuminated potential benefits of learning more about how some Succeed Again sites succeed with their students. The study found the Andrews site graduated 128 students in 2012, while others sites produced only 25 completers, and one site graduated only 15 students. For 2012, the Succeed Again program generated, as a whole, 1250 diplomas. However, if each site achieved the Andrews location's graduation rate, total program output would have been 3,328 graduates, an increase of 266 percent. The study argued the impact of the program could be greatly enhanced if more were done to improve the functioning and consistency of the program at all of its sites, and recommended further study focusing on the development of best practices for all sites.

The 2013 study utilized qualitative research to assess the program's impact on former graduates. Each of 12 interviewees graduated and pursued some type of higher education. The research goal was to learn whether students who completed the program felt academically prepared when they encountered post-secondary level academic work. All students surveyed stated they felt prepared for college-level assignments, and that the program had significantly altered their *perceptions of education*. Every student interviewed had entered the program with profoundly negative perceptions of the role education played in their lives, and exited with not only a positive view of education, but also a desire to pursue an education beyond high school.

While this was a study conducted only at one site, and with students exposed to one particular teacher, the findings suggest that independent study-based programs possess the *potential* to have not only an impact on the numbers of students moving from dropouts to graduates, but also to significantly alter a student's belief that education is important. The

Succeed Again program needs to know if these findings are occurring at other top performing sites, and if they are not, how the program can structure professional development that can lead to the positive outcomes found at Andrews.

The Problem

Despite positive findings from the Andrews site, the performance of many Succeed Again sites was inconsistent and, in some cases, quite poor when measured in terms of graduate output and student retention. Unfortunately, while there were several sites that performed measurably better than others, little was known about what these sites were doing to create larger numbers of graduates and higher student retention rates. This was a problem because the Succeed Again program was unable to capitalize on valuable best practices that could be gleaned from those sites, and because students at many sites were receiving lesser educational opportunities than others.

Understanding best practices and training teachers in them is a vital, missing step for the program. Succeed Again offered its teachers and staff practically no professional development. Such limited training may have been partially responsible for the program's 30 percent reduction in graduates in 2013. Because research into independent study-based dropout recovery is limited, the Succeed Again program needed to develop its own research base for training teachers and addressing underperformance.

Understanding what happened to Succeed Again students post-graduation is also important. While the program's mission stated a goal of preparing students to succeed on the post-secondary level, the program had no instrument to measure progress toward this goal. The program did not track students after they graduate. This was problematic for two reasons. First, one of the main goals of Succeed Again was to change their students' behavioral patterns. The

program endeavored to alter habits and life-choices that had been negatively affecting students' academic performance for the better. The program needed to know if these changes persisted and helped graduates succeed in college. Second, the research on alternative pathways to a high school diploma indicates that many programs targeting dropouts are quite simply ineffective, unsuccessful and lack adequate academic rigor (Dynarski et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). It was important for the Succeed Again program to know if the education provided by its independent study-based design adequately prepared students for study after high school. This was especially important during times where school budgets were shrinking and alternative programs were often cut. The program needed to demonstrate to district leadership that it was a viable, effective pathway for educating students.

The Project

This project asked teachers and counselors at three high performing Succeed Again sites what practices they employed to generate high numbers of graduates and strong student retention rates. In addition, it asked Succeed Again graduates that enrolled in post-secondary education about their perceptions of how effectively Succeed Again prepared them to succeed in the higher education setting. Additionally, it examined the teacher, counselor and graduate experiences at one of the program's lower-than-average performing sites, in order to provide a counter-case against which to compare the high performers. The findings from this project will help the Succeed Again program improve the consistency of the educational experience across its 26 sites, as well as provide a means for the program to assess its impact on college-readiness. My research is designed to answer the following questions:

1. What did teachers and counselors at sites that produced high numbers of graduates and strong student retention rates say they were doing to achieve those results?

2. What did Succeed Again graduates who matriculated to a higher education setting feel about the program's impact on preparing them for post-secondary level academic success?

Research Design and Methods

I chose qualitative research methods for this project because qualitative research best allowed me to arrive at answers to my research questions. My questions were designed to investigate the actual *experiences and practices* of staff at Succeed Again sites and students who had completed the arc of dropout to higher education student, and their perceptions could only be assessed through qualitative interviewing.

This project employed interviews, observations, document review and data analysis. I worked with staff and graduates from four independent study-based dropout recovery sites within the Chaparral Unified's Succeed Again program. I interviewed each site's teachers and consultant, as well as five graduates from each site who later went on to post-secondary studies. The interviews of teachers and consultants at high performing sites were designed to assess what practices these educators engaged in to place their sites among the top performing sites in the program. The low performing site provided a counter-case narrative against which to contrast the findings from the high performing sites. The interviews of students were designed to capture the history of their academic careers from their road to dropping out and their perceptions of education at that point in time, to their enrollment in the recovery program, their experiences within the program, and their experiences at the post-secondary level.

I gained access to these sites in my role as a former teacher in the program, as well as through the agreement of Chaparral officials who wished to gain a greater understanding of the Succeed Again program and its performance. Document review and data analysis was employed

to learn more about how these programs accomplished their task of graduating dropouts: how many students are assigned for each teacher and facility, the ratio of program completers to program dropouts, how much work is assigned and how students have contact with their teacher were some of the variables I considered. I also examined the initial reading levels student testing provided when they enter the Succeed Again program. By combining data analysis with the interviews, I generated a series of best practices that can be employed by the Succeed Again program for teacher training, districts looking to engage in dropout recovery, and post-secondary schools looking to learn more about the students they serve.

Public Engagement

With this project, I intended to further the research base on independent study-based alternative education programs and advocate for the implementation of these types of programs as strong models for dropout recovery efforts. In addition, I hoped the findings would help programs such as Succeed Again demonstrate they are an effective platform for increasing graduation rates by reengaging dropouts, and help strengthen their performance, thus providing enhanced educational outcomes for traditionally underserved students. I planned to present these findings to various officials at Chaparral Unified, and encourage them to continue to fund dropout recovery efforts, and return budgets for the program to pre-2011 levels. Superintendent George Porter saw the earlier Succeed Again study referenced in this chapter, and was interested in what I found with this project. In addition, three Chaparral Board of Education members were already aware of this study and eager to learn what it yielded in terms of best practices. I planned to present these findings at various conferences to raise awareness of the applicability of independent study-based programs for serving dropouts, and pursue further avenues for making this research valuable to the community of researchers that study dropouts and dropout recovery.

CHAPTER TWO: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Consistently high dropout rates and low graduation rates have plagued American high schools since the early 1970s (Dynarski et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). While this underperformance is well-documented, little progress has been made in lowering high school dropout rates and raising high school graduation rates (Miao & Haney, 2004; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Rates remain particularly stubborn in traditionally under-served urban areas, and across traditionally marginalized populations such as minority students and children from low-SES backgrounds (Belfield, 2007a; Howard, 2010). This literature review provides background to frame America's long-standing dropout crisis, its causes and effects, and attempted solutions over the past forty years.

I begin by framing the context of the dropout problem in America. Statistics outline the severity of the problem, and detail the outsized impact dropout behavior has on both minority and low-SES student populations. The next section focuses on the monetary costs of the dropout crisis: for the individual dropout and for the society in which they live. I then turn to the characteristics that place an individual student at-risk of dropping out, and then examine research concerning the various ways that states, districts and schools have attempted to deal with the dropout crisis. I conclude with research on independent study settings and curriculum for high school students. The literature is sparse, especially as it pertains to dropout recovery, and points to a gap in the literature.

Dropout and Graduation in America: What the Numbers Tell Us About Where We Are Today, And Where We Have Been

At the end of the 2013 school year, Education Week reported that the nation's graduation percentage had risen to its highest rate since 1970, approaching a national average nearing 75 percent (Editors, 2013). This step forward represented a nearly 2 percentage point increase over

the rate for 2009, a rise of close to 8 percent over the past decade, and led the editors of Education Week to postulate that the graduation rate could rise above the previous historical high of 77.1 percent within a few short years (Editors, 2013). Moreover, the gains in graduation rates took place across demographic groups, and most of the improvement over the past decade came from groups that have historically underperformed. Latino graduation rates have risen 16 percent since 2000 to 68 percent for the class of 2010, and the 62 percent graduation rate for black students represents a ten-year increase of 13 percent (Editors, 2013).

However, a graduation rate of less than 75 percent means that more than a million American students leave high school without a diploma each year. And though minority groups are showing progress, they still trail the performance of white Americans. Native American graduation rates are actually in decline. While their rate has improved by three percentage points since 2000, in three of the past five years, their graduation rate has decreased (Editors, 2013). Education Week reported that the reasons for the increase in graduation rates might not be due to improvements in schooling but tied to societal factors such as the Great Recession (Editors, 2013), and that students who drop out of schools face numerous barriers when attempting to return (Sparks, 2013b), a finding echoed in much of the literature concerning dropping out (Dynarski et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). In addition, while increased attention focuses on reengaging dropped out students (Sparks, 2013a), these efforts are often ineffective, with a large number of youth who do re-enroll in school eventually dropping out again (Rumberger, 2011; Sparks, 2013a). Ed Week echoes other researchers in reporting that programs designed to re-engage dropouts often offer academically insufficient curricula and instruction (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Rumberger, 2011; Sparks, 2013c; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009) and that states and school districts often exacerbate the difficulties facing dropouts who

wish to return to school. Policies that restrict students from returning because of their age, or provide little incentive encouraging schools to recover children who have dropped out, are hampering recovery efforts (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Lloyd & Matthews, 2013; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

The increase in the graduation percentage is encouraging. Yet we must consider the numbers, and how they are calculated, with care. The methodology used in Ed Week's calculations, known as the Cumulative Promotion Index, or CPI, purports to be accurate because it counts only high school diploma recipients and not GED or equivalency recipients as graduates ("Methodology," 2013). However, it is impossible to assess the accuracy and relevance of any calculated rates because requirements for graduation and internal calculation methods can vary not only by state, but by districts within those states (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Miao & Haney, 2004; Rumberger, 2011; Suh & Suh, 2004a; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Indeed, much debate surrounds how United States schools report and scholars calculate graduation and dropout rates (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Dynarski et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2011; Suh & Suh, 2004a; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Differing methodologies have led researchers to calculate graduation rates above 80 percent (Roy & Mishel, 2008) and as low as 67 percent, with a minority rate as low as 50 percent (Greene, 2001). Tracking high school completions and calculating a graduation rate may appear simple, yet several scholars argue that calculating the national dropout percentage is extraordinarily complex (Miao & Haney, 2004; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Greene, 2001). The difficulty is engendered by several issues: the lack of a uniform national standard for who counts as a graduate, differing types of source data, and an inability on the part of national educational organizations to even agree upon what constitutes a "high school graduate" (Rumberger, 2011). As Miao and Haney (2004) and Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) point

out, there are several different ways states, and even districts within those states, count their graduates. Some states and districts count only students who complete a traditional high school diploma, while others include GED recipients. Districts and states often lack a system for tracking students when they transfer between districts or across states (Miao & Haney, 2004; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Rumberger, 1986). This issue is further complicated when a student takes longer than the traditional four years to finish high school. If a student finishes school eight years after entering high school by enrolling in an adult school program, should he/she then be counted as a completer? Does including these completers actually obscure the severity of the dropout problem in a given state or district? With different methodologies of measurement employed on both the district and state levels, the nature and extent of the dropout problem becomes obscured.

Yet by tracking one measurement over time, as Education Week does in using CPI for its annual Diplomas Matter report, it is possible to identify trends. And while the progress reported this past year's issue is welcome news, it also carries with it information that continues to trouble experts. The increase in graduation rates has occurred across most minority groups, but low graduation and high dropout rates continue to plague non-white minority students and those from low-SES backgrounds (Lloyd & Swanson, 2013). This situation's persistence over decades (Alexander, 2012; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Dalton, Glennie, & Ingels, 2009; Dynarski et al., 2008; Howard, 2010; Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2009; Rumberger, 2011) has led scholars to view these statistics as a key component of the educational "achievement gap" (Darling-Hammond, 2006; Howard, 2010). Such underperformance poses a danger not only to these select groups of students, but also to the nation as a whole.

Data disaggregated by race paint a bleak picture of the challenges many low-SES and minority children face when they enter school. While the latest CPI numbers show a national graduation rate of 79.6 percent for White students, Latinos lag significantly behind, graduating at a rate of 68.1 percent. For Black students, the performance gap increases, as they graduate at a rate of only 61.7 percent nationally, and American Indian students fare even worse, with slightly more than half, a mere 51.1 percent reaching graduation, a decline between 2009 and 2010 (Lloyd & Swanson, 2013). The data indicates the graduation gap between Whites and Latinos has been cut nearly in half in the past decade, and the gap between Black students and Whites has decreased by 30 percent (Lloyd & Swanson, 2013), but a great deal of work remains.

In addition, national averages display only one facet of an intricate puzzle. When data are examined on a state-by-state basis, more complex shadings emerge. Performance varies widely on a state-by-state basis, and increases indicated by the national averages are not being seen in all states, nor felt by all subgroups. The CPI ranked Vermont as the state with the nation's best graduation rate, pegged at 85 percent. Yet Washington D.C., with traditionally high-minority, low-SES enrollment had a graduation rate of 57 percent for its Class of 2010, 28 percent below that of Vermont. New Mexico reported a graduation rate of only 59.4 percent. At a time progress is being reported, 5 states, Michigan, New Mexico, Rhode Island, South Dakota and Utah were actually found to have graduation rates that had decreased, and 11 states saw a jump of less than 3 percent (Lloyd & Swanson, 2013).

United States high schools are making progress towards increasing graduation rates and decreasing dropout rates. However, little is understood about exactly *why* this is occurring, what instructional strategies and interventions may be responsible for this increased performance, and whether these increases can be sustained. And at a time when the importance and value of an

education is perhaps greater than ever (Alexander, 2012; Bailey, 2007; Freeland, 2013; Orfield, 2004; Cecilia Elena Rouse, 2007), historically underperforming sub-groups such as low-SES children and minority youth continue to trail the performance of white, wealthy Americans, often by large margins. Unfortunately, the costs to these individuals, and to the nation as a whole, are severe, and may be increasing as globalization continues.

The Costs of Dropping Out

Over the past several decades, multiple researchers attempted to define the exact costs dropout behavior inflicts upon both students and the nation (Belfield & Levin, 2007b). In a 1972 report for Congress, Henry Levin and other researchers estimated that inadequate education in America, defined as failure to graduate students from high school, generated 237 billion dollars in lost income, and 71 billion dollars of lost government revenue (Levin, 1972). Converting those 1970 dollar amounts to present day values using the Consumer Price Index, the costs would be 1.4 trillion and 426 billion dollars respectively (“Consumer Price Index (CPI),” 2014). The study calculated the cost of providing educational services to eradicate underperformance, finding that benefits in increased tax dollars alone more than doubled the cost of improving inadequate education. A different study examining predicted Texas dropouts from the Class of 1986 pegged overall costs at 17.5 billion dollars, while the cost to stop this behavior would be only 2 billion dollars, a ratio of almost nine to one (Robledo, 1986). And a study of Los Angeles’ high school graduating class of 1985 found a decrease in lifetime economic activity of 3 billion dollars, a net loss in 2014 dollars of 6.5 billion from just one graduating class, from one year, in a single American city (Catterall, 1985).

The costs of this type of behavior are large, detrimental, and have persisted over time. Studies such as the ones mentioned above are actually criticized as *underestimating* the true costs

of dropout behavior. Their early vintage often precluded the researchers from understanding the true complexities of how educational underperformance impacts an economy (Belfield & Levin, 2007b). However, these early studies offer a historical context in which to frame America's dropout rate: despite longstanding scholarly knowledge and understanding of the cost of educational underperformance, little progress has been made, illustrating the complexity of the problem. And indeed, more recent research (Moretti, 2007; Muennig, 2007; Cecilia Elena Rouse, 2007; Waldfogel, Garfinkel, & Kelly, 2007) offers updated dollar values, as well as expanded paradigms of how educational leaders should be conceptualizing the costs of educational underperformance. The picture they paint is bleaker still.

Researchers often divide the costs of dropping out into two categories: costs to the individual and costs to society. A great deal of literature covers these categories (Moretti, 2007; Muennig, 2007; Cecilia Elena Rouse, 2007; Rumberger, 2011; Waldfogel et al., 2007), providing data from economic and sociological studies that assess the impact of an inadequate education.

For the individual, dropout costs impact earning potential, health, incarceration, family formation, engagement with civic life and intergenerational mobility (Belfield, 2007a; C. E. Rouse, 2005; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Wage earning is deeply depressed by the decision to leave school. As of 2004, the actual amount of money earned by dropouts is only 37 cents for every dollar earned by a graduate. This disparity increases each year. Dropouts actually made 64 cents on the dollar in 1964 (Cecilia Elena Rouse, 2007) It is becoming more expensive to be less educated. Figures from 2006 show that women graduates earn \$7,395 more annually, while for men the difference is \$9,564 (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Calculating these costs across the length of careers, the wage loss approaches \$300,000 (Belfield, 2007a; C. E. Rouse, 2005; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Wage costs are exacerbated as education's role as a gatekeeper to viable employment in today's society increases (Bailey, 2007; Belfield & Levin, 2007b; Freeland, 2013; Orfield, 2004; Cecilia Elena Rouse, 2007). American students, once vying only with their geographic peers for future employment, now face competition for American jobs from students all over the world. America's economy, dominant when based on manufacturing, now needs a stronger-educated workforce prepared for the modern, high-tech economy (Bailey, 2007; Freeland, 2013; Cecilia Elena Rouse, 2007; Tienda & Alon, 2007). Middle-income jobs of the future will require higher education. Those who do not complete high school will be shut out of such jobs, relegated to a lifetime of minimum-wage in the service sector (Freeland, 2013; Orfield, 2004; Tienda & Alon, 2007).

Between 1991 and 2004, the industrial workforce in America shrunk by 2.3 million jobs (Orfield, 2004), most of these jobs that required only a high school education or less, and many within industries that have continued to shrink over the past 10 years. Globalization created a world economy where there are higher-paid, better jobs at the top of the economic pyramid, very little change for the lowest-tier workers, and a disappearance of the jobs in the middle that formed the basis for the American middle class (Freeland, 2013). Making it through college is ever more vital. Post-secondary education completion has been the main driver of the increase in wage inequality in America since 1973, an inequality that is rapidly increasing today (Freeland, 2013). While dropouts trail high school completers by \$300,000 in lifetime earnings, they lag college completers by \$1,000,000 (Freeland, 2013). And while one can attend college without completing high school, chances are minimal that they actually will (Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The opportunity for such students to find meaningful, fulfilling employment dissipates with each passing year (Bailey, 2007; Freeland, 2013; Orfield, 2004).

Researchers enumerate multiple additional pitfalls awaiting dropouts. They are far more likely to have serious health issues and raise children suffering from similar ailments (Muennig, 2007). They are more likely to engage in criminal activity and spend time in prison (Alexander, 2012; Moretti, 2007). Dropouts suffer from mental illness in higher percentages than completers, are more prone to having children out of wedlock and raising those children in single parent households, and are also more likely to pass the cycle of poverty and broken family characteristics on to their children (Belfield, 2007a; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Each effect on the individual accumulates, negatively impacting society as a whole. The decreased earnings of dropouts lower the nation's tax base. Annual losses exceed \$50 billion in state and federal taxes for all dropouts age 18-67 (Belfield, 2007a; Bridgeland et al., 2006; C. E. Rouse, 2005; Rumberger, 2011). A one percent increase in high school completion for males aged 20-60 would save the nation up to \$1.4 billion in costs associated with crime, and \$58 billion in health-related costs (Belfield, 2007a; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). And participatory democracy suffers, with dropouts two to three times less likely to vote than college graduates (Belfield, 2007a; Rumberger, 2011).

With the above costs only a sampling of the total impact, governments, schools and community leaders are probing the dropout problem more deeply. A consensus is emerging that early intervention is a key to stemming the dropout tide (Belfield, 2007a; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Dynarski et al., 2008; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 1987, 2011; Stearns & Glennie, 2006). Yet to catch a dropout early, districts need to know exactly what one looks like.

What Makes a Dropout?

The inability to moderate the dropout crisis indicates the problem's complex nature. At the root of this complexity lies the puzzle of what exactly causes a student to drop out. Multiple studies attempt to answer this question, applying qualitative means (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Meeker et al., 2009; Romo & Falbo, 2001), quantitative analysis (Silver, Saunders, & Zarate, 2008; Stearns & Glennie, 2006) and meta-analysis of the literature (Dynarski et al., 2008; Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). All find it impossible to identify the exact causes of why an individual drops out of school.

However, researchers agree it is possible and vitally important to identify and assess what characteristics, qualities and situations *might* create a student *at-risk* of dropping out. Researchers label these traits and qualities *predictors* (Bridgeland et al., 2006, 2006; Dynarski et al., 2008; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Finn, 1989; Meeker et al., 2009; Romo & Falbo, 2001; Rumberger, 1987, 2011; Silver et al., 2008; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Suh & Suh, 2004b; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Identifying these traits and the children who possess them can help target intervention designed to reduce the number of dropouts.

The relationship between understanding risk factors and successfully lowering the dropout rate is not guaranteed, however. As we have seen, little progress has been made in lowering the dropout rate over forty years, even though many risk factors were understood during those years. In a wide-ranging review of federal dropout prevention programs, Dynarski and Gleason found that risk factors actually *did not* accurately predict whether a student would drop out, and that the majority of the programs they reviewed were ineffective (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). Yet they also found that identifying risk can help with early detection of the potential for dropout, and that programs were using risk factors in a simplistic manner. Dynarski and Gleason found that programs were using risk factors to trigger “one-size-fits-all”

interventions, and should instead focus more intensely on the factors and how they actually impact the individual student. So the study finds that risk factor identification is not having an impact reducing the dropout rate, it concludes that risk factors and the proper utilization of them can be a crucial factor in creating successful programs tailored to students' individual needs (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002).

In his 2011 book Dropping Out, Russell Rumberger performs an exhaustive review of dropout literature, surveying over 300 sources and compiling a meticulous list of predictors. The literature spanned multiple disciplines, including education, criminology, economics, sociology and psychology. While Rumberger states his list is incomplete, it is a thorough compendium of dropout predictors.

Multiple qualitative studies confirm his findings. Meeker, Edmonson and Fisher surveyed and interviewed 158 Texas students involved in a GED program, publishing their findings in 2009. Bridgeland, DiIulio and Morison conducted focus groups and interviews in both urban and rural areas in late 2005. They interviewed dropouts between 16 and 25 years old, 52 percent male and 48 percent female, 36 percent white, 35 percent black and 27 percent Hispanic. Bridges, Brauckmann, Medina, Mireles, Spain and Fuller conducted focus groups and surveyed 133 ninth grade students in five California high schools, focusing on how students felt predictors impact their lives.

In the following section, I review Rumberger's list. For many, I include, in italics, voices of the students affected by these predictors, culled from the qualitative studies. Their stories provide context and a human voice to the subject.

Signs of Danger

Rumberger classifies predictors into two broad categories: individual and institutional. He subdivides individual predictors into four categories: **educational performance, behaviors, attitudes and background**. Rumberger finds the most important individual predictor of dropping out is **educational performance**. Many researchers echo this finding (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Dynarski et al., 2008; Finn, 1989; Meeker et al., 2009; Silver et al., 2008; Stearns & Glennie, 2006; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Failed courses are a strong predictor of risk, with passing ninth grade the most critical milestone for avoiding the dropout trap. Students who fall off-track are three and a half times less-likely to graduate on time than peers who complete ninth grade on time (Rumberger, 2011). In Los Angeles, students passing algebra in the ninth grade are twice as likely to graduate as those who do not (Silver et al., 2008). Additionally, failing and being held back will make a student over-age, which is another key predictor. Ninth grade students in Los Angeles of typical age were twice as likely to graduate as those over-age (Silver et al., 2008). A student from the studies cites the impact of such poor performance:

What really gets me, like not wanting to come to school is...when I try and I fail--that's what discourages me, that's what makes me want to think, you know I don't need school. A lot of other people drop out because...if you go and you fail---you're just like, what the hell, why even bother? (Bridges et al., 2008).

A student's mobility during high school is also critical. Los Angeles students attending one school have a 57 percent graduation rate, while those attending two or more schools graduate at a rate of only 32 percent (Silver et al., 2008). Students from the qualitative studies concur:

Too far behind and not financially stable enough to stay in one school, so it was harder to learn...My stepfather and myself didn't get along which cause (sic) me to move out at an early age of 14. Then it was just difficult for me to attend high school...I was in foster care and I move (sic) around a lot so I couldn't stay in one place to complete school (Meeker et al., 2009).

Student behaviors also provide predictors. Rumberger cites engagement as crucial: both academic engagement, indicated through behaviors such as attendance or having a positive attitude about school, and social engagement, feeling a part of the school and its culture. One study indicated 47 percent of those surveyed found school boring, with these responses a snapshot:

[High school was] boring, nothing I was interested in... it was boring...the teacher just stood in front of the room and just talked and didn't really like involve you...There wasn't any learning going on...they make you take classes in school that you're never going to use in life (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

The quality of a student's peers and their behavior, and working too much are additional behavioral predictors. Deviance, encompassing delinquency, drug and alcohol abuse, teen-pregnancy and school misbehavior has high predictive value as well. Reviewing data from the 1997 National Longitudinal Study of Youth, Sweeten identified one of the largest behavioral impacts upon dropping out: involvement with the police or the court system. Students who are arrested once during high school have double the odds of dropping out, while a court appearance during that time makes a student almost four times as likely to drop out (Sweeten, 2006).

Attitudes also affect whether a student is likely to drop out. Liking school and wanting to do well positively impacts student achievement, with the opposite behaviors in the category of predictor. Goal-oriented students are less likely to drop out. Rumberger finds sophomores planning to complete college are five times less likely to drop out than others. A negative self-perception, or the feeling a student has limited control over their life are strong predictors. The students concur:

They say it's a waste of time and it's not going to help you. Well, at least my sister, she says, she's like 'I work so hard, and high school doesn't help you. What am I doing now? I'm working as a cashier. It doesn't help you; it just takes time away from you.' That's what she said...It's probably 'cause they have no hope...they feel that they can't do anything. They don't want to deal with it—they can't do it—so they just drop out (Bridges et al., 2008).

The final category of individual predictor, **background**, includes demographic makeup and health. Rumberger distills demographic predictors to a simple statement of “dropout rates are higher for males than for females, and they are higher for blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans than for Asians and whites”. However, he explains this statement is simplistic. For instance, while females drop out at a rate lower than males, black females are actually more at risk than the overall male cohort. First-generation Hispanic immigrants are more likely to drop out than second-generation, yet third-generation Hispanics reverse that trend and drop out at higher rates than the second-generation. And while a weak grasp of English is a strong predictor, biliterate Hispanics not only drop out at lower rates than those mastering only one language, they actually are less at risk than whites.

The second broad category of predictors, institutional, concerns a child’s surroundings: **family life, community, and schools**. Rumberger considers three aspects of family life of prime importance: structure, resources and practices. Structure refers to the number and type of individuals in a household, and the stability and quality of those present. Generally, students are at lower risk if they live with two educated parents that are involved in their schooling and in control in their role as a parent, do not move a lot, and are not considered low-SES. The opposite characteristics are all predictors. Single parent students are more at-risk, and students moving three or more times during their academic careers are three times more likely to drop out than others. Living in poverty makes a child three times more likely to not graduate. Only half of homeless students complete high school. Also, students with a dropout sibling are at risk of following that pattern.

Bridgeland et al. confirm these findings on parental involvement. After asking dropouts to consider the amount of awareness their parents had of their school attendance and grades, 73

percent said their parents were either not aware at all or only somewhat aware and 78 percent felt their parents were either not aware at all or only somewhat aware of the fact they were about to drop out of school. Dysfunction in the home is also cited in the stories of students from another study:

Lack of supervision at home...I had a lot of family problems, I was forced to quit high school...My mother pulled me out of high school so that she could finish her beautishen (sic) license...I (was) running away from home because I had an abusive dad that would constantly drink. Then I meet a guy in high school and I thought, that would be a good thing to escape my family. This guy promised me I could go back to school. I droped (sic) out from 9th grade and got pregnant. So I had my baby and my boyfriend left me (Meeker et al., 2009).

Communities heavily impact student performance. A plethora of researchers (Ferguson, 2007; Rebell, 2007; Rumberger, 2004, 2011) cite the influence of three community characteristics: access to institutional resources such as child care and hospitals, parental relationships, which help a child connect with family, friends and the neighborhood and finally, social relationships, which help provide community supervision of youth activities. Children from stronger communities are less likely to leave school.

It is important to note that the vast majority of Rumberger's compendium of dropout predictors focuses heavily on a student-deficit model where students, their families, and often their cultural backgrounds shoulder the blame for academic underperformance. A large body of research puts forth that this "blame-the-student" deficit model misses the true cause of student underperformance and eventual dropout (T. Howard, 2008; T. C. Howard, 2010; Valencia, 2010). Rumberger's final predictor, **schools**, is unique to his list in that it places responsibility for dropout behavior *outside* of the control of the individual student and squarely on the institutions responsible for educating them. The quality of schools highly impacts students. If high-risk peers, those possessing one or multiple of the aforementioned predictors surround a student, that student is more likely to drop out. Schools with high-poverty, high-minority

enrollments have larger faculty turnover, putting students at-risk. Low teacher-quality makes a student high-risk. Lax academic requirements, weak bonds between teachers and students and student tracking practices are all behaviors predicting dropout. School quality is often so low that many researchers find that schools actually cause their students to become ensnared in the criminal justice system, a phenomena termed the school-to-prison pipeline (Biegel, 2012; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005; Fenning & Rose, 2007; Noguera, 1995). Poor teacher quality and inadequate, inappropriate school structures, hallmarks of the school-to-prison pipeline and so-called “dropout factory” schools are constant refrains from students:

The work wasn't even hard...once I figured I wasn't going to get any learning done in there, there wasn't any need to go...They just let you pass, anything you got (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Teachers were not willing to teach...I hated the teachers and I hated school...Judgment was assessed on me by teachers and other staff...Rude students, impatient teachers, dress codes, structured life (Meeker et al., 2009). There's not enough books...The desks are all broken and they're all different...and there's all the tags on the desks (Bridges et al., 2008).

Despite the importance of identifying them, researchers caution that predictors can and must not be viewed as *causes* of dropping out (Dynarski et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2004, 2011), because it is impossible to understand the exact relationship the predictors have with each other and what specific one actually triggers the dropout event. For example, if a student is disinterested in school, leading to low grades, their disinterest could be caused by a lack of food at home, poor teaching, the presence of at-risk peers or a graffiti-covered textbook making the child believe the school does not care about him/her. More likely, it was caused by the presence of all these characteristics and a complex interplay between them. Also, because much of the data is self-reported, student self-awareness and truthfulness calls into questions the findings of any study.

Any list is bound to be incomplete, and further data crunching will often yield new predictors to add to the list. Suh & Suh performed a forward iteration on over 180 variables

impacting dropout behavior collected from the 1988 NELS. They noted a strong correlation between hours of TV viewing and low grades, then tied the low grades to dropping out (Suh & Suh, 2004b). This predictor was missed by not only by Rumberger, but other studies as well.

Despite deficiencies, the Rumberger compendium provides a strong starting point for identifying potential dropouts across the nation. The value of such a list is to provide early detection leading to early intervention. And early, several scholars tell us, may be the key to making headway against this stubborn problem.

How Do We Help: What Have We Tried, and What Have We Learned?

While leaving school often occurs in high school, many researchers find dropping out is better understood as a process that can begin well before a student reaches high school. In their studies, dropping out is the culmination of a disengagement beginning early in a child's life (Ensminger & Slusarcick, 1992; Finn, 1989; Reynolds, Ou, & Topitzes, 2004). This concept may help explain the relative lack of progress the American educational establishment has made in lowering the dropout rate. Often, prevention and recovery programs occur at the high school levels, perhaps targeting students too late in the disengagement process (Bridges et al., 2008; Dynarski et al., 2008; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 2011; Silver et al., 2008).

This criticism is found often in literature considering the two main interventions employed by school districts in the United States: the GED and continuation high schools. Researchers find both efforts ineffective in multiple ways (Belfield & Levin, 2007b; Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Dynarski et al., 2008; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Rothstein & Wilder, 2007). Both target students who are of high school age or older. Researchers find the GED yields minimal economic benefits (Cameron & Heckman, 1993), leads students away from rather than

towards college (Cameron & Heckman, 1993) and provides a suspect, unequal replacement for an actual education (Belfield & Levin, 2007b; Cameron & Heckman, 1993; Rothstein & Wilder, 2007; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), among other faults. Continuation schools are viewed as dropout factories doing little to retain students, lacking oversight and being used as a means for school systems not to educate children, but to mask their own failures and sky-high dropout rates (Kelly, 1993). In addition, rather than providing a welcoming environment that leads to success for previously underserved populations, their very nature of serving only those students deemed “unsuccessful” or “inappropriate” for traditional settings stigmatizes those students that attend, dooming them to failure rather than success (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Kelly, 1993; Rumberger, 2004, 2011).

In The Price We Pay, economists Clive Belfield and Henry Levin attempt to provide a way forward with a multi-purpose study. First, they review the literature covering programs designed to lower the dropout rate, focusing on studies with experimental or quasi-experimental methodologies or with what they consider a credible economic design. The researchers identified only five programs that met their criteria and yielded positive, demonstrable improvement in graduation rates. Of these programs, only one took place at the high school level. Two were preschool programs, one elementary and another was implemented across the K-12 years. The relative lack of successful high school programs can be viewed as confirming the trend towards stressing early intervention.

Yet interestingly, their economic analysis of the five programs showed the most beneficial in terms of savings to society was the First Things First high school intervention in Kansas City, at a net savings of \$150,000 per additional high school graduate produced. In addition, First Things First produced the second-largest amount of extra graduates per 100

students served. While the literature suggests that the number of effective high-school level interventions may be minimal, the cost and effectiveness of First Things First suggests late interventions may yield positive results, from an economic and educational perspective (Belfield, 2007a).

Belfield and Levin's work is also useful in that it identifies what they perceive as effective in intervention programs. When viewed alongside Tyler and Lofstrom, who review literature on recovery programs, and Martin and Halperin, who report the characteristics of 12 dropout programs across the country, as well as additional research, a fairly specific list of qualities possessed by successful intervention programs emerges. Elements shared by successful programs are: close mentoring and monitoring of students with a high adult-student ratio, case management of individual students, family outreach, curriculum focusing on careers and gaining math and English proficiency, components helping students address out of school problems, the ability for students to work at their own pace, flexible scheduling and year-round learning, employment opportunities, clear conduct codes, curricular options, small schools, high levels of personalization, high academic expectations, strong counseling, parental engagement, extended school sessions and competent personnel (Belfield, 2007b; Belfield & Levin, 2007a; Ferguson, 2007; Martin & Halperin, 2006; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

Independent Study: A Way Forward?

While all of the elements for success listed may not be included in an independent study learning platform, multiple qualities identified in the literature leading to success with dropout prevention and recovery are characteristics inherent in independent study design. The California Department of Education defines independent study programs as recognized alternatives to traditional study that provide an instructional strategy responding to an individual's needs and

styles of learning (California Department of Education, 2000). The program is expected to be equal or superior in quality to classroom instruction, and allow students to proceed at their own pace with a challenging, flexible curriculum. Independent study programs must focus on achievement of mastery of basic skills while allowing for flexible scheduling and offering effective educational choices for families and students (California Department of Education, 2000). Each of these mandates matches the successful qualities for dropout recovery programs suggested by the literature.

Within the existing literature on high school programs, independent study is categorized under the umbrella of “alternative education”. Many alternative education programs have existed since the 1960’s, but are gathering more attention from educational leaders and scholars in recent years due to the implementation of NCLB and the rise of the charter school movement (Barrat & Berliner, 2009; Lange & Sletten, 2002). While scholars note that alternative schools have been on the American educational landscape since the beginning of public education (Young, 1990), they are still today regarded as being “cutting-edge” educational reform (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Alternative education programs are obvious options for addressing the dropout problem. They fall into each of the three categories of approaches suggested by scholars as potential fixes for the nation’s dropout problem: targeted, comprehensive and systemic (Rumberger, 2004). Targeted approaches are programs aimed at a specific group of students most at risk for dropping out, or that have already left school. These two efforts are most commonly known as *dropout prevention* and *dropout recovery*. Continuation high schools and additional services offered by traditional high schools for students they deem as at-risk are traditional examples of this approach. Comprehensive approaches deal with reforming or creating entire schools that better

educate all students in attendance. Reforming or reconstituting an existing high school, creating a new school or implementing collaborative relationships between schools and external agencies are examples of comprehensive dropout prevention strategies. Systemic changes involve altering the way in which entire school systems work. Systemic dropout reduction strategies are such options as raising the age when a student may legally withdraw from school or altering the requirements a student must satisfy to earn a diploma.

Independent study-based design can play a role in each of these approaches, and may in fact combine two or all three of the suggested fixes. Independent study can be implemented within an existing school as a means of targeting a specific population, be the design for comprehensive reform as an entirely new school or the reformation of an existing educational setting, or it can be a key part of introducing a new option for students as part of a reduced-credit or accelerated graduation systemic reform. The flexibility offered by these programs may account for their rise in popularity. In a response to policymakers and educators in 2009, Barrat and Berliner used a school-level longitudinal dataset from 2001/02 to 2006/07 and conducted a mixed methods study aimed at assessing the state of independent study high schools in California. Policymakers and educators wanted to know more about the practice because although they knew there were a great deal of independent study high schools in the state, little was known about how many students they served, who those students were, or how prepared the programs were to educate youth in the newly-implemented accountability culture created by NCLB (Barrat & Berliner, 2009).

The study found that the deployment of independent study high schools was not only widespread across the state, but also that enrollment in these programs was increasing at a rate far outstripping enrollment in traditional high schools. During the five-year period studied,

students enrolled in grades 9-12 in California's independent study high schools rose 44.2 percent, to a total of 58,788 students. Combined with students pursuing independent study courses of instruction within traditional high schools, the number of students in the state educated with this method was 84,348, or 4.2 percent. In contrast, traditional high school enrollment rose by only 11.5 percent during this time period (Barrat & Berliner, 2009). Independent study is serving more students, and its employment as an educational delivery mode for California high school education is expanding rapidly.

Barrat and Berliner unearthed several other interesting facts about California's independent high schools. 54.9 percent targeted a specific population, and 45.5 percent of those were targeting students at risk of school failure, suggesting independent study is an effective route for targeting such populations. The students served by these programs were 44.4 percent White, much larger than the 32.9 percent found in traditional high schools. Despite targeting low performing students in a state where the majority of those students are students of color, these programs were recruiting more White students than any other group, suggesting an avenue to expand the impact of these programs to more traditionally marginalized populations such as low-SES students of color. And when comparing the teachers in independent study high schools, Barrat and Berliner found them to be less well-prepared than their counterparts in traditional high schools, with only 73.9 percent of core classes taught by a highly qualified instructor (Barrat & Berliner, 2009). The researchers concluded their report by suggesting that further research should target investigating student performance and graduation and dropout rates, as well as college-going rates and habits of students served by these programs. They also suggest that more research needs to be done "documenting how independent study high schools support students at risk of school failure" (Barrat & Berliner, 2009).

Barrat and Berliner's call for more research squares specifically with the study proposed in this project. The two researchers also echo a chorus consistent throughout the literature on dropouts, dropout prevention and dropout recovery. An overwhelming majority of researchers find not enough is known about America's dropout crisis, less is known about the interventions designed to address it, and an even smaller amount is understood about the types and characteristics of programs that are succeeding in lowering the dropout rate and increasing the nation's graduation rate (Belfield, 2007b; Belfield & Levin, 2007a; Dynarski et al., 2008; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Kerr & Legters, 2004; Orfield, 2004; Rumberger, 2011). This lack of knowledge is a key component of the problem itself, and the area of the problem this study seeks to address.

CHAPTER THREE: METHODOLOGY

Purpose of the Study

This study investigated successful practices within the Chaparral Unified School District's Succeed Again dropout recovery program, and assessed Succeed Again's impact on program graduates who enrolled in post-secondary education. Succeed Again is an independent study-based dropout recovery program enrolling high school dropouts and severely credit-deficient students, placing them on an alternative path to a high school diploma. While aggregate program data demonstrated strong output measured by graduation totals and retention rates, these measures of performance varied widely across the program's 26 sites. Some sites were successful at retaining and graduating students while others were not. This study explored the best practices employed by sites with strong graduation and retention rates and identified practices for program-wide improvement.

In addition to assessing best practices with an eye toward improving overall program performance, this study attempted to understand the academic experiences of program graduates after they had enrolled in post-secondary educational settings. While one of the goals of Succeed Again as expressed in its mission statement is to produce "college-ready graduates," the program had no instrument for evaluating whether or not this crucial goal was being met. In exploring program graduates' self-assessments of their college-readiness, this study sought to understand the program's impacts on its graduates' college-preparedness, as well as demonstrate the importance of creating an instrument to measure this program goal.

The study sought to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. What did teachers and counselors at sites that produced high numbers of graduates and strong student retention rates say they were doing to achieve these results?

2. What did Succeed Again graduates who matriculated to a higher education setting perceive was the program's impact on preparing them for post-secondary level academic success?

Study Design

To answer these research questions, this study employed a design known as the *success case method*. Developed by Robert Brinkerhoff, the success case method was designed to provide a simple, quick, yet rigorous design for performing a limited form of program evaluation. Success case studies examine high performing units of organizations in order to assess what these strong performers may be doing to achieve their results, and then use what is learned to view the entire organization through the lens of the best practices generated through the study.

This iteration of the success case method was qualitative, as such methodology was the best way for me to arrive at answers to my research questions. Because I was interested in what teachers and staff members *thought* they were doing to achieve strong results, and in what graduates *perceived* to be their levels of college preparedness, qualitative interviewing was most appropriate. These types of interviews yield detailed and descriptive data, and the opportunity for probes and follow-up questions allowed for both expected and unexpected responses to be immediately explored in more depth (Merriam, 2009).

The success case study also allowed for triangulation and cross-comparison of data, something vital for this study (Brinkerhoff, 2003). Because I was seeking to define best practices within strong-performing sites, it was necessary to not only assemble a robust picture of exactly what was occurring at the sites observed in the study, but also to compare how each site was achieving its level of success to see if any of the three utilized similar practices.

Performing case studies of multiple sites utilizing the same interview protocols and document review practices allowed for simple cross-comparison of data once data collection and analysis had been completed.

Site Selection

This specific success case study examined three high performing sites within the Succeed Again program. Additionally, it examined one lower-than-average-performing site in order to assemble a counter-case narrative. Strong performance, for the purpose of this study, was defined as program sites that produced a high number of graduates when measured against the total number of teacher hours provided to each site and the total number of students served by each site in a given year. Program success was therefore viewed through the lens of a student completing the following process: a student is enrolled, that student is retained, and the student ultimately reaches graduation. Low performance was indicated by a low number of graduating students.

While strong performing sites were not plentiful in Succeed Again, several did fit the above definition for “high performance”. The criteria set for this study were the following: sites must perform at 30 percent above the program’s average graduate production, when measured against both the number of teacher hours allotted to each site and the number of students enrolled for each site in a given year. Sites matching the criteria were identified through an examination of archival program data. The low performing site was one creating graduates at a rate of 20 percent below the overall program average. Succeed Again’s Program Coordinator provided data for all 26 sites, spanning the school years of 2008-09 to 2012-13. This time frame provided a five-year overview of site and program performance.

Because sites differed in the number of teacher hours allotted, it was necessary to create a metric that compared the number of graduates produced by a site compared to its overall teacher hours. Creating this metric made it possible to compare sites with differing teacher hours and budgets against one another. It additionally allowed for each site's performance to be accurately assessed across the five-year time span if their resource allocation had changed. Retention rates were calculated by comparing the number of students each site graduated against the overall number of students the site enrolled in a given year. Graduation totals were calculated through a simple tally of the number of graduates produced by a given site. Comparing this simple number against teacher hours and against total number of students served allowed for a more clear picture to emerge of exactly how strongly each site was performing in creating graduates when compared against each other, both through the lens of how effective the site was with its allotted resources, and how efficiently the sites were graduating students. The data were examined as annual totals as well as in the aggregate for the five-year time span, but in order to qualify as high performing, sites had to best the five-year program averages for both metrics.

I identified four strong-performing sites as potential candidates for the study. One was eliminated, as I was a staff member there during three of the years examined through the program data. The three Succeed Again sites selected were: Osborne, Booker, and Benoit. In addition to having been strong-performers, the three sites represented a wide variety of locations across the city. This allowed for success to be viewed as a result of program qualities and practice, rather than as an occurrence related simply to geographic location. I secured access to these sites by speaking with the program's director, Ms. Armstrong, as well as the consultant responsible for running each of the three selected sites. After hearing the design and rationale for the study, each of the three sites agreed to participate. The counter-case site is Succeed

Again's Chilton branch, located in yet another geographically distinct area of the city. The consultant at Chilton was told only that this was a study of the Succeed Again program and its effects upon graduates that later attended college. The site was not informed that they were being studied due to low performance, although questions within the protocol did address the fact that the site was performing under the program average for graduate production.

Participants

Three staff members were interviewed at each of the selected sites. The personnel interviewed were the site's consultant, as well as the two teachers assigned to the site. These were the three staff members that had direct contact with students and thus, a direct impact upon their graduation prospects. Consultants were counselors responsible for recruiting and enrolling students, managing site budgets, and communicating program information from central office to site staff members such as teachers, teaching assistants, and school administrators. In addition, consultants forged connections with local high schools and continuation schools to secure a constant pool of students. They also evaluated student transcripts and test scores to ensure that Succeed Again was an acceptable learning environment for the student. Further, they helped teachers and students with coordinating a student's graduation plan, tracking what courses they needed to finish to fulfill all graduation requirements.

The primary responsibilities of teachers at each site were providing day-to-day, independent and small-group instruction to enrolled students, as well as ensuring a graduation plan was in place and utilized for each student. Teachers were responsible for collecting work weekly from each enrolled student on their roster, as well as grading the work. They were assisted in grading by teaching assistants, and managed the teaching assistants' job duties on a day-to-day basis. Teachers were also expected to make personal connections with each student's

family members, and to contact the home whenever work was not turned in on time. Each teacher was responsible for teaching across the curriculum, meaning that in a given day, each may have provided instruction in over ten different subject areas.

The final group of participants was 5 graduates from each site that later matriculated to a higher education setting. These former students were contacted by the outreach consultants, and then placed in touch with the researcher. The only requirements for participation of these students were that they agree to be a part of the study, have graduated from the specific Succeed Again site, and later matriculated to or graduated from a postsecondary educational institution.

Data Collection Methods

Interviews:

The study used interviews to probe for the relationships between teacher and consultant practices and strong graduation performance, as well as program components that affected how strongly or poorly Succeed Again graduates performed at the post-secondary level. While questions were asked from a previously designed protocol, the structure was flexible and allowed for further probing when responses to the protocol warranted it. Appendix A provides the interview protocol for high performing sites. Appendix B provides the interview protocols for the low performing site.

I interviewed two teachers and the consultant from each of my four selected sites. The protocols addressed the practices of each staff members. From teachers, I sought information about what practices they perceived lead to high graduation performance. Questions concerned how they initially connected with students, how they assigned work to each student, what practices they engaged in to motivate students to complete work and what level of personal connection they had with both students and students' families, in addition to other topics.

Similarly, interviews with consultants focused on their perceptions of what practices within their job lead to strong graduation performance. Questions considered the methods consultants used to find students, how they enrolled students into the program, and whether or not they set a baseline for student skills by utilizing test scores, along with a consideration of multiple additional practices. I also asked questions of all staff members regarding the impact of recent program cuts and their views regarding the overall structure and effectiveness of leadership and decision making within Succeed Again's program-level leadership.

Interviews with program graduates provided the data needed to answer my second research question. I conducted interviews with five graduates from each of the three sites. The graduates were former students who completed the Succeed Again program and then went on to enroll in postsecondary education. This method was appropriate, as I needed to assess the perspectives of these students in order to evaluate Succeed Again's true impact upon their academic preparedness for postsecondary educational requirements. Questions focused upon how the students felt about their preparedness for college, and what impact they felt their exposure to Succeed Again had on their success levels in the postsecondary arena. In addition, the questions explored life challenges faced by the graduates both in the past and present, examined the causes of why they initially were low performing high school students, and probed for ways in which Succeed Again may have positively impacted their academic trajectory. Specific attention was directed toward learning what parts of Succeed Again positively affected students' ability to succeed at the postsecondary level, and what facets of the program should be improved or changed to raise the possibility of graduates' postsecondary success.

A second method of data collection in this study was document review. At each site, I collected and examined multiple documents, including student enrollment forms, weekly

assignment sheets and teacher-created handouts. These documents provided information regarding a student's initial ability as indicated by test scores upon intake, performance on the California High School Exit Exam and GED, as well as the number of courses each student needed to complete in order to reach graduation. Weekly assignment sheets indicated the workload assigned to every student, how successfully those students completed the work, and whether there were variations in the practices of teachers regarding assignments. Information assembled through the document review allowed for triangulation with data collected in the qualitative interviews, allowing for the assembly of a more thorough picture of exactly how each site, teacher and student functions within the program.

Data Analysis

I triangulated and coded the data for broad themes, such as student perceptions of instructional quality and instructor perceptions of the validity and importance of data informing their practice. An initial coding map can be found in Appendix C. After coding the data from individual interviews and triangulating them against the data collected at all the sites, broad themes began to emerge. Within these themes, when considering teachers and outreach consultants, I looked for select groups of best practices. These practices included establishment of close personal connections with students, a practice of contacting parents when program requirements were not met, viewing teamwork and organization as an essential components of success and many other findings. Interviews with graduates were analyzed with a focus on program components that lead to strengths and weaknesses at the postsecondary level. Struggles with math and a program-level lack of college counseling and preparedness were among the weaknesses found through the student interviews, but by and large, the impact of Succeed Again on participant's lives was immensely positive. Graduates reported that engaging in independent

study at the high school level increased their ability to perform well in the increasingly independent academic structure often found in colleges and community colleges, and that the program had immensely impacted their view of education in a positive, life-altering manner.

One final method of analysis was to cross compare the cases that were assembled from each of the three high performing sites. Cross comparison allowed for drawing conclusions about what types of practices were found at each successful site, as well as what types of characteristics were present in graduates from high performing sites, and whether these graduates experienced Succeed Again in a similar manner. Cross comparison allowed for broader conclusions to be reached about what tactics lead to success at the program level, rather than only at the site level. I also cross-compared the findings from the successful sites against those from the low performing site. It was important to examine the best practices that emerged from cross comparison of high performing sites to note whether they were present or absent at the low performing counter case site. In addition, conducting these individual case studies at geographically distinct locales allowed for more generalizable conclusions.

Ethical Issues

One potential ethical issue concerned low performing sites and instructors within the Succeed Again program. While this project focused on the top-performing sites and stressed the amount of good that was being done by staff members, it was true that the majority of the program did not perform at that level, and that the counter case included in the study was intentionally selected to reflect practices at a lower-than-average-performing site. Readers of this dissertation, after examining the high performing sites, may ask the question, “Why wasn’t the entire program performing like this?” Questions such as this could draw attention to the lower-performing sites and instructors, negatively impacting their future employment prospects.

However, the rigorous design employed in this study was an attempt to arrive at a true picture of *why* the program does work well *when* it works well. Findings, particularly those related to best practices, can be used to improve underperforming sites and to better the futures of potentially hundreds if not thousands of students in the future. The potential benefits for students within the Chaparral district and the Succeed Again program outweighed concerns about sites that were underperforming.

However, for the sites and graduates involved in this research, there were minimal ethical concerns. Since I did not work directly with any of the staff to be interviewed, and since the students had left the program, my role did not lead toward any issues such as bias or coercion. The sites were offered the opportunity to participate or not, and were not forced to join the study by myself or anyone within the school district. There was every reason to believe that researcher interaction with study participants was entirely ethical and would result in no undue harm to the subjects. In addition, multiple steps were taken to preserve the anonymity of the sites and instructors participating in the study.

Credibility

The construction of my site selection process was a means of ensuring credibility. Grounding site selection in two data metrics, those of graduates per teacher hour, and graduates per students served allowed the reader to understand the rationale for why this study examined the sites it did, as well as believe the selection was legitimate rather than haphazard. Identifying high performing sites as those that demonstrated both rates 30 percent above program averages ensured the sites selected were actually strong performers, thus creating a data-driven rationale for why these sites should be examined and that the findings of best practices at these sites were credible. In addition, these metrics could potentially be used to frame the performance of *other*

dropout recovery programs, thus allowing Succeed Again to be measured against their success, and allowing for this study to be repeated by other researchers in other settings.

There were several other aspects of this study design that addressed credibility. First, qualitative interviews were the proper, valid method to answer the research questions, as the study sought to assess the *perceptions* of staff members and program graduates. Interviews were the most reliable means of gaining deep understanding of these research subjects' thoughts, feelings and lives. Second, choosing to research three sites rather than just one, and basing this study upon the findings of an earlier one (Oleks, 2013) allowed for the information assembled at each site to be measured against and triangulated with information at the others, as well as against the data from the earlier study. This triangulation allowed for a clearer picture to emerge than if the study were conducted at only one site. And finally, the two-pronged structure of the study itself, designing it to examine not only the experiences of staff at successful sites but also of graduates from those sites increased validity, especially because there was a correlation between the findings.

CHAPTER FOUR: FINDINGS

This study investigated the effectiveness of an independent study-based program and curriculum as a means for recovering dropped out high school-aged youth and placing them on a pathway to high school graduation. Additionally, the study examined the effectiveness of this type of program design and curriculum in preparing such students for success in post-secondary educational settings. Little is known about what types of dropout recovery programs and strategies prove effective (Dynarski et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2011), and even less researched and understood are specific programs that utilize independent study with dropouts. Virtually no research exists examining the impact these types of programs have on the post-secondary experiences of their graduates (Dynarski, 2004; Rumberger, 2011). This study was an attempt to remedy that gap in the research literature, and to do so, sought answers to the following research questions:

1. What did teachers and counselors at sites that produced high numbers of graduates and strong student retention rates say they were doing to achieve those results?
2. What did Succeed Again graduates who matriculated to a higher education setting feel about the program's impact on preparing them for post-secondary level success?

In order to better understand what works for this historically difficult-to-serve student population, the study utilized a success case study design. Four separate sites operating under the umbrella of a 26-site dropout recovery program located in a large, urban school district in the Western United States were examined. Three of the sites were identified as successful because they graduated a large number, and a large percentage, of their students. The fourth site performed lower than average when compared to the rest of the program, and thus was utilized as a counter-case against which the findings from the strong sites could be contrasted.

The findings from this study are presented in the five sections of this chapter. The first three sections are brief descriptions of the high performing sites that were the locations for the research. The fourth section details what I learned from interviews and document review conducted at those three sites, and from interviews with former graduates. The fifth section is a case description of the underperforming site, and a compilation of what was learned there. It focuses specifically upon how the beliefs and practices of staff members, and experiences of their graduates, both are similar to and at times quite different from those of the interviewees from the high performing sites.

It is important to note that the Succeed Again program that I found in this study was *vastly* different than the one data indicated existed from 2008 to 2013. District budget cuts begun in 2011 had cut Succeed Again's budget in half by 2015. As often occurs when education budgets decrease, there was a lag in the drop in performance. However, by the time interviews were conducted for this study in 2015, the full brunt of Chaparral Unified's cuts was evident. A decision to reorganize the division overseeing Succeed Again caused a major staff shakeup that compounded the budget decrease. So while the case studies leading off this chapter were conducted at sites that 2008-2013 data indicated were the program's highest performers, and are labeled "success cases", what I found there, and what I describe are sites that existed in a severely diminished state. The fourth section of this chapter details what I learned once I had tracked down all former members of the successful sites, and is far more indicative of once led to exceedingly strong performance in Succeed Again.

Success Case Study One: Benoit Succeed Again

The data collection phase of this study began at Benoit Succeed Again, located in a southeastern location of the city serviced by the program. As is often the case with initial

viewings of schools, a familiar, rather non-descript atmosphere pervaded. The program was housed in a single, rectangular, grey bungalow typical to the many local schools of the area. Loudspeaker announcements for an upcoming school site council meeting and fundraiser sounded immediately upon my exit from my car into the covered carport. A lone janitor slowly pushed his wheeled barrel past the entrance ramp on a surprisingly warm Friday morning in early January, and greeted me with a silent smile and nod. This case study describes my initial findings at Benoit by focusing on several aspects of what I observed: the physical state of the buildings and classrooms, the makeup of the current staff, and a brief examination of program data I gathered from the site. It considers Benoit's history demonstrates that the data I gathered presents a Benoit that contrasts markedly with the one that existed a mere three or four years earlier. Unfortunately, a contrast to past high performance would not be unique to Benoit.

My first inkling that something was amiss at Benoit came not from what I heard, or saw, but from what I smelled. When I entered the bungalow housing the program, a deep waft of skunk hung in the room. "Sorry about this," said the current consultant, Erin K. "Can you believe this? This is where they move us. Skunks have been under there for months. We have a work order in to get them out. If we try to close the hole ourselves, we get in trouble."

I learned quickly at Benoit that while the skunks had moved in, the staff had moved out. Erin K. was the lone instructor remaining from those that had generated such high performance a mere three years before. These diasporas were depressingly common. Not one of the three high performing sites I visited was intact in terms of personnel. Only two of the four Succeed Again sites in this study had two remaining staff members from the years in which I had analyzed data. "When they cut the budget, people started talking about leaving," said Erin. "Then when they blew up the division, people ended up wherever they ended up, a lot of times not even in the

program. That's what happened to Helen. Then when they moved our site the third time, Caleb quit."

Succeed Again has sustained massive cuts in the past six years. A program budget of over 14 million dollars sustained the 26 sites in the 2008-09 school year. By the 2014-15 school year, that number was 8.1 million, a cut of 42 percent. The cuts came piecemeal over the years, 10 percent initially, then 20 percent, then another 20 percent, kicked off by the global financial crisis and exacerbated by dire state education budget woes. In the midst of the cuts, the superintendent slated the educational division of Chaparral Unified that controlled the program for closure. The division survived, barely. However, it went through, according to many, a highly flawed restructuring based on seniority determined by suspect paperwork and administrative favoritism.

After the cuts, very few people who had made Succeed Again what it was, and particularly those who led the high performance at sites from 2008-2013, were working there anymore. Many had left the program entirely, and, sadly, every single former high performing employee I spoke with was attempting to engineer an exit strategy. This posed an obvious and unwelcome challenge to data collection. It forced me to track down former employees wherever they had landed: other schools, programs, and retirement. The stories they told of their past success, and their leaving, mixed with the diminished state of what had once been the crown jewels of the Succeed Again program, lent the data collection process an air of sadness and lost potential.

At one time, Benoit Succeed Again was the highest performing site in the program. In 2008-09, it produced 62 graduates, saw a jump to 91 graduates the following year, and in 2010-11, Benoit became the first Succeed Again site to surpass 100 graduates, topping out at 111.

This is a rather astonishing two-year graduate jump of 79 percent. However, the next year their facility moved, and Helen H., a high performing instructor transferred. Graduates dropped to 67.

The reconstitution of the division, and another facility move, dropped graduates to 44 in 2012-

13. Caleb I., the long-time consultant who had run the site for 13 years, described a third move.

We were moved for the third time from two individual sites that we developed. Beautiful locations that looked almost like corporate offices. This involved cooperative efforts. It's not something I could have done on my own...Many people donated services and time and equipment and things like this. When we were moved for the third time, it was to two buildings that were very old...you could not walk in the gate because the vegetation was so overgrown. There was graffiti on the wall, the walls had holes in them, furniture was piled up, there were cobwebs, spiders, bugs.

Caleb I. transferred at the end of the year, resigned from running sites, and chose to teach at a lower performing site across town. That 2013-14 school year, the year of Caleb's departure and the third move, Benoit produced only 14 graduates, a drop of 87 percent from their high, achieved only 3 years prior.

I found Caleb I. at his new site, where he had become the highest performing instructor at a low performing site, graduating double the students than his fellow instructor. His room was immaculate, bright, and cheery. Student work and graduation target boards were on the walls. The room hummed with activity, his teaching assistants busily corrected work and assisted students that had remained after hours. His co-teacher's room, next door, was darkly lit, and her teaching assistant thumbed at her cell phone, the dim light illuminating her face in the grim milieu. The teacher was nowhere in sight. "Coming here was a nightmare," Caleb told me. "The passion that I had for working with my students and then going to a place where none of that's there, is very disappointing."

At least Caleb I. was still in the program. His former high performing colleague at Benoit, Helen H., had stopped teaching entirely, becoming a counselor at a local adult school in a

neighboring town. “It killed me to leave. I never would have left. I mean, I *didn’t leave*, they *bounced me*. It was *ridiculous*.” During redistricting, Helen had been told that despite having fifteen years in the program and 20 years teaching, she did not have seniority enough to stay. “I mean, they had people who had been in the program two years, *two years!* Oh, well, you know about the water, that it goes under the bridge.” She was attempting to break back into the teaching ranks by securing an additional credential.

Caleb, Helen, and Erin were the team that had led Benoit to the heights of its success, and they had clearly scattered due to the district cuts. When budget cuts were imposed, they were applied to the Succeed Again program across the board. Every site, regardless of its performance, took the same hit. All twelve staff interviewed for this study, including those who had been at the below average counter case site, believed this was a poor decision by program leadership. “They killed the program,” said Helen H. Erin K. concurred. “They just made everyone worse, the good ones got worse, the bad ones got worse. Probably less worse, because they were so bad to begin with.”

Benoit was a shell of its former self, and not just in graduates. Consultant hours were down 37.5 percent, teacher hours down 33 percent. The facility was an absolute mess, far from the “corporate office” days mentioned by Caleb. The skunks were only one part of a rather consistently grim tableau. Old, discarded computers were stacked in one room of the portable bungalow that now housed the site. Two teachers and three teaching assistants were crammed into a second room, and Erin utilized the dead computer room for student counseling sessions and orientations. Unpacked file boxes were all over the tables, and a coating of dust lay on many desks. Paperwork sat incomplete, and correction of student work, according to Erin, was two

weeks behind. New staff had been placed into the program during re-organization and were not used to the workload, or the student population, rendering them ineffective.

The need for the program was still there. Benoit's dropout population is fed by a local high school that had been placed into a district-wide intervention program for troubled schools. Four-year cohort graduation rates failed to top 75 percent in 2012-13. Yet the cuts had taken their toll on the once strong site. An enrollment that once hit 180 students had fallen to under 80. Morale was low, as was achievement. It was, in many ways, a remarkable fall.

The state of the staff at Benoit was among the most shocking differences I observed. At the height of its strength, Benoit Succeed Again boasted two teachers and a consultant, who amongst them, totaled 49 years of experience working in Succeed Again. It was a staff deeply rooted in the culture and mission of serving dropouts, and skilled in dealing with the population due to their years of experience. The staff I found at the newly reconstituted site consisted of two teachers that possessed a mere three years of experience between them, and a consultant with 18. Cynicism was rampant, and the consultant spoke of the staffing changes that had been foisted upon Benoit due to the cuts and reconstitution. "They're just throwing people in everywhere and anywhere, and they may not be suitable for, I'm sorry, but not only does a student have to be suitable for Succeed Again, but I think teachers should be too." This was a far cry from the Benoit where the staff once spoke of themselves as "the ultimate team" and "in love with our jobs and what we were doing". Unfortunately, this first taste of dysfunction at a once high performing site would not be my last.

Success Case Study Two: Booker Succeed Again

Far from my immediate experience of seeming normalcy upon encountering Benoit, my initial and subsequent arrivals to Booker Succeed Again served as a symbolic introduction to the

programmatic decay I would learn of inside. This decay was unfortunately quite similar to what I had found at Benoit. Decay of the physical structures, resources, the staff, and the students themselves, would emerge as a theme that repeated itself, in slightly varying iterations, at each site I examined.

Arriving in a central, more urban section of the city, I parked my car at the curb and proceeded to the fence surrounding Booker's two grey bungalows. A security guard stood behind the gate, appearing thankful that the doorway was reinforced with both an electric lock and a formidable-looking steel padlock and chain. A wildly gesticulating, grey-haired man clad only in a bathrobe, slippers, and what appeared to be two plastic hospital admittance wristbands was vigorously questioning the guard. Finding me on his shared side of the fence, he briefly assailed me for my opinion on "the fallacy, the *utter fallacy*, of our surroundings", before shuffling away, muttering. This brief case study of Booker Succeed Again focuses on what I found inside in the physical surroundings, and the story of what I heard about their staff. It also details how the program data I gathered, examined in light of the history of the Booker site, depict yet another formerly successful site struggling to find a pathway to its former high standards of performance.

Just like Benoit, Booker was a site bereft of its former staff members. Only one of the original high performers remained, the site's consultant, Maritza L. She manned one of the two bungalows, and just as Erin K. had when I first entered Benoit, apologized to me for the condition of her facility. "I am almost sorry to have you here. They moved us this year and we just have not had time to even unpack, let alone make things halfway decent. But we are trying." The site had seen the same cuts as Benoit, with consultant hours declining by 37.5 percent, and teacher hours by 33 percent from the years in which they maintained excellence. Maritza L.

spoke of a desire to see her site rewarded for past high performance. “I wish each site could be given hours, given appreciation based on numbers. Instead, we all go down together, and they don’t care if this site has a hundred students graduating.”

Desires for performance-based decision making were common at every site I visited in the program. It was clear that the cuts had devastated each site’s ability to perform well and provide a decent education to children, and that the lack of hours and proper staffing had made a significant impact. While Maritza L.’s bungalow was a bit of a shambles, with paperwork and student records strewn across her desk, she had made attempts to organize. There was a grad board listing all the year’s current and potential graduates and student achievement certificates were on the walls. Group photos of past graduating classes in their caps and gowns, as well as individual photographs of the current year’s class hung conspicuously just by the door, and a reading nook had been arranged at the far corner. The bookshelves were filled with a diverse collection of novels and non-fiction, and a cozy carpet and chair setup was just to the side of the mini-library. But Maritza L. noted the impact of program cuts on her ability to keep the site functional. “Honestly, just time is not enough. There is so much to do. There is so much work...right now, that I’m here, oh my God, it’s so hard.” And she told me that the cuts had impacted her willingness to give more of her time since her hours had been cut. “I used to stay three, maybe four hours over. Now, I have one rule, that after four years of three hours more each day, I am not going to do it anymore. I wish I would have been paid for that, and it would have been appreciated.”

Time-management capabilities, and morale, were negatively impacted at every site I visited in the course of this study by a Chaparral Unified decision to eliminate Succeed Again’s former computerized student-tracker database and replace it with a new district program. The

former program, known as Doris, was a database unique to the program, housing the information only of Succeed Again students and meant to be used only by Succeed Again staff. It catalogued and displayed a wealth of individual student, site-based, and program-wide data. Staff could examine the academic histories of their students, as well as their progress and status in the Succeed Again program. Test scores, reading level assessments and student and family biographical information were accessible at the push of a button. Staff could monitor their progress as a site, aggregate and disaggregate data to better understand student subgroups, and examine program-wide performance, allowing them to measure their own performance against the performance of others.

The decision to eliminate Doris was very unpopular with Succeed Again employees. Interviewees were unanimous in expressing this opinion. Making matters worse, the changeover to the Chaparral Unified system was plagued by glitches and lost data, leaving Succeed Again without any computerized database whatsoever. This was the explanation offered for the clutter of student files that lined Maritza L.'s desk. Consultants were forced to compile all student progress data by hand, filling out course completion sheets and test scores on folders that would then be sent in to Chaparral district offices. "It was very difficult to lose Doris", said Louiza K. "It was very difficult because we don't have anything. She further noted that the absence of Doris had created an inability for Succeed Again to operate in a data-driven manner. "We should have an increased focus on data. But first we need to have something to track the data. Data plays a big role...we're out of data, we're out of resources."

The room occupied by teachers was as grim as the one I found at Benoit. While devoid of skunks, the unfortunate, ubiquitous, dilapidated, outdated, archived computers and monitors perched perilously atop desks throughout the bungalow. No grad boards were hung, no student

work adorned the walls. Two teachers with a combined Succeed Again experience of three years staffed the site. This was a far cry from the two former team members Maritza L. directed me to, Lorena H., a teacher with nine years' experience who had been forcibly transferred during the program's reconstitution, and Carlos K., a veteran with twenty years of Succeed Again experience who had retired rather than engage in rebuilding the program. All told, due to these departures, the site had experienced a drop in institutional knowledge of 67 percent. Twenty-six years of experience and training in the Booker system had vanished in a mere three years.

Lorena H. and Carlos K. expressed a similar viewpoint regarding their displacement from Booker. Neither of them had wished to leave, and both said they would still remain at the site had the cuts not been so brutal and conducted in such a haphazard manner. This opinion was consistent with the beliefs of every other displaced or retired employee interviewed for this study. They all had wished to stay, and were either pushed out, or compelled to leave for financial considerations or philosophical differences. Carlos K. summed up the rationale I heard from a great number of former or transferred Succeed Again employees.

Look, I mean, I know that some people can survive on working twenty hours a week and then scrap together some second job, but at my age, would I want to? Would you want to? Or even, could I? What was I going to do, bartend? Besides, it was just ridiculous. They had torn the program apart to shreds. Nothing was left, and I truly believe that it will never be functional again. They didn't have people who could lead it when it was intact, never mind lead it out of a hole like the one they dug. I would have worked another ten, maybe fifteen years even. But retirement was a better choice. It was just too goddamn depressing and disgusting to go in every day and look at what was happening.

The loss of experienced instructors such as Carlos K. and Lorena H. was a large blow to a site that was already under pressure from constantly declining staff hours, and would later be forced to move to a new facility for the first time in twenty years. All of these factors, when coupled with the Doris database debacle and rapidly declining morale, provided a strong rationale for understanding the decreased production at this once strong site. During the 2008-

2009 to 2011-2012 school years, teacher hours awarded the site remained constant at 57 hours per week. And graduate production remained steady, with 89, 71, 86, and 85 students completing the program in those years. But in the first year of large cuts to teacher hours at the site, when teacher hours fell to 40 per week, the total number of graduates plummeted to 55, a 35 percent drop in output as measured by program completions. For school year 2013-14, the total graduates from site number only 34, a 62 percent decline from their peak graduation total of 2008-2009. A program characterized by very strong, very consistent graduation totals had been transformed into a low performing entity in the span of two years. Neither Carlos K. nor Lorena H. was present by 2013-14.

Such underperformance disappointed not only staff, but also the neighborhood and community that the Booker Succeed Again program serves. While not located in the poorest section of the city, Booker does serve children in an area where education is sorely needed. Only 33 percent of the residents in the zip code where Booker was located had graduated high school, and a mere 16 percent possessed a college degree. The population is majority Hispanic, a group traditionally underserved by schools and in need of greater educational opportunities, not fewer. And poverty levels are high, with 63 percent of households in the zip code earning less than \$30,000 per year. With low-SES Hispanic youths being among the highest risk groups for engaging in drop out behavior, Booker graduates such as Deena M. stressed the need for an alternative mode of education like Succeed Again.

Both of my brothers dropped out when they were in tenth grade, so it was nothing new to my family or nothing I really thought was too bad. In high school, I didn't really care. I just wanted to hang out with my friends. They just taught you and if you got it, you got it, and if you didn't, well, they didn't care. But at Succeed Again they push you to do your work and call your parents if you don't. They are always there to help you out. I didn't finish English class since high school and I had never read an entire book in my life until Succeed Again...I really wanted to make my mom proud and show here that I could finish.

The decline and institutional neglect witnessed at Booker assumed an even more ominous overtone when viewed alongside the demographic challenges of the Booker neighborhood. And the program's struggles cast the triumphant stories of graduates such as Deena M. in another, darker light. While stories of success and the positive impact Succeed Again had on the lives of program graduates were large in number, the decline of the program made it clear that the number of students sharing these stories in the future would be greatly decreased.

Success Case Study Three: Osborne Succeed Again

The outside-the-central-city location of Osborne Succeed Again meant fresher air, and its distance from any hospitals made my arrivals certainly less fraught with nerves than my visits to Booker. Osborne did not even possess a gate, nor a visible security guard. Yet there was, once again, a grey, two-bungalow structure populated by at least one staff member that had found her way inside only recently, and from an academic area far outside that of dropout recovery. "I taught ESL, to old people, old ladies, and I loved it. It was not like *this*", she said, gesturing at the three children who sat at desks halfway across the room from her large, grey metal desk. "*This*, this is not really what I signed up for. But it is a job."

My experiences with the staff that had made Osborne what it once was were, thankfully, far different from this initial encounter with their newest staff member. However, they would again indicate a program in decline. This brief case study describes the physical surroundings I encountered at Osborne Succeed Again, and some of what I learned from compiling the history of the site's staff. This information, and program data gathered from the site, indicate Osborne was experiencing decreased performance along the same continuum of Benoit and Booker.

Osborne is located in a different neighborhood than any of the other sites in this study. The facility's zip code is home to a majority white population that is far more highly educated

than the populations surrounding Booker, Benoit, and Chilton. 63 percent of the residents have completed high school graduation or beyond, with 21 percent attaining a Bachelor's degree, 10 percent in possession of a Master's, and 2 percent completing the Doctoral level. The rate of English-speaking in the home is high for Succeed Again locations, with 72 percent of households using English as the primary language. Median household incomes in 2011 were just above \$80,000, outpaced the state average by 40 percent, and 12 percent of the population was below the poverty level, compared to a state average of 16 percent.

In short, snapshots of demographic data indicated Osborne did not appear to be a community in dire need of a dropout recovery program. However, Osborne Succeed Again thrived for many years, boasting one of Succeed Again's most consistent enrollments and one of its largest success rates in graduating students. This level of success has been a source of some controversy in the program. Osborne was what was referred to as a "second-generation" Succeed Again site. When the program began in the late 1980's, there were twelve "anchor" sites located across the city. The "second generation" sites opened during a period of rapid expansion during the mid-1990's, a time when the challenges facing youth living in the city were growing with alarming speed. Fourteen additional sites would join the "anchor sites" between the mid 1990's and 2010, when the final two sites were opened. Some Succeed Again employees feel "second generation" sites such as Osborne and Benoit benefitted from their ability to learn from "the mistakes" of the "anchor sites", and that the "anchor sites" were at a disadvantage, in terms of performance, because they were established first in the "most at-risk areas" of the city and worked with "the hardest kids".

However, data collected for this study did not lend credence to these theories. Booker was an "anchor" site, and outperformed the vast majority of Succeed Again sites despite being

located in a high-poverty neighborhood. Several other “anchor sites” performed at or above the program average for graduate creation, and six “second generation” sites are among the program’s worst. In short, ascribing performance to neighborhood or “difficulty” of students or time of founding is conjecture at best, and an excuse for underperformance at worst.

Osborne staff were particularly sensitive to this mode of thinking about their long history of success. Many in the program linked their strong performance to location, but in reality, there was a very concrete rationale for Osborne existing where it did, one that debunks the affluent location leads to high performance theory. “We were established at this location precisely *because* it is safe, so it is a place we can take kids to where they won’t be in danger. The schools we pull from are among the worst in the whole damn city”, said Maria K., the former consultant at the site. “A lot of my kids I have now are living in the area that I used to teach in, so when people want to use that as an excuse for their own laziness, it drives me *crazy*”, said Nancy W., the Osborne teacher who once worked at a site known as one of the program’s roughest.

Indeed, an examination of the site’s enrollment records demonstrated that the vast majority of students attending Osborne matriculated from some of the city’s lowest performing high school institutions. While the Osborne neighborhood may have been a pocket of affluence, it was bordered on the east and south by two areas of the city with far lower standards of living, and high schools that struggled to graduate their students. This high level of poverty and low performance of neighborhood high schools created the need for the Osborne Succeed Again and provided its constant student flow. Osborne’s two main feeder high schools had been placed in Chaparral Unified’s specialized high school intervention program. Neither school topped 80 percent for their four-year cohort graduation percentage, and both kept those cohort statistics high by aggressively feeding students directly to Osborne in order to take them off their books,

and thus remove any potential dropout from their statistics. “The instant a kid left those schools, I would get a call to recruit him”, said Maria K. “It was good, because if the kid came here, they would have a chance. And probably a better education than over there. But it was also a cynical numbers ploy.” Maria K. ascribed a lot of her success to relationship building with counselors at the local high schools. “I knew them all, and they all knew me. We *never* lacked for students. I worked hard at that, put in a lot of time.” This created jealousy from other consultants, she felt.

“Look, I was never the easiest person. I was a bit blunt. So when other sites would complain they couldn’t get enrollment, but also say their neighborhood was so rough and ours was easy, I’d say ‘Well, which is it? If it’s so rough, why can’t you find dropouts? If I’m in the easy place, shouldn’t I be the one having trouble?’ I probably lost a few friends.”

Program graduates also spoke of the high need for the program when they discussed their initial experiences with high school and contrasted them to their time at Osborne. “I was a middle class kid with nice parents. So I went to a local charter, and halfway through the second semester the counselor there told me that no matter what I did I wasn’t graduating”, said Osborne graduate Helena T. She then transferred to one of the local underperforming high schools, and described her struggles with being behind. “Someone shoves you into a geometry class when you don’t know anything about algebra, you’re like, ‘What am I doing here?’ Now I really *do* feel stupid. I fucking hated that place, and all the people, so I quit.” She then spoke of the strict nature of Osborne Succeed Again making her reevaluate her choices.

I saw so many kids that came through here and they had just turned 18 or just turned 19 and Miss K. had to be like, “I’m sorry, this place isn’t for you any more. You don’t do your work, and you had your chance.” So many of us had gone to school together over there. A lot of those people were my friends and I was like, “I don’t want to be you. I don’t want to be going to adult school when I’m twenty and saying, ‘Hey, I don’t have a GED.’” Miss K. was strict, and it worked, on a *lot* of us. We knew what we could and couldn’t do, and when people were fucking up, we’d be like, “Yo, you better get your shit together, or you are gonna get bounced.” Seriously, I learned so much from them, and I don’t know *where* I would be today without Miss K. and Miss W.

While these stories of turnaround from dropout to graduate were plentiful at Osborne, the program's traditionally high enrollment and performance did not continue once budget cuts hit. Much like the other former high performers at Booker and Benoit, Osborne's performance has dipped in a similar manner since the across the board cuts were applied. All three staff members expressed dismay that they were targeted for cuts while other sites within the program were performing so abysmally, and noted that the cuts had made it far more difficult to do their jobs effectively.

In school year 2009-10 and 2010-11, the site produced 100 graduates, but that number dropped to 79 the following year. During the reconstitution of the program in the summer of 2012, Maria K. retired, and one teacher at the site, Nicole N., took over her position. A new teacher was assigned to the program that had never before worked with dropouts. The site's graduate total for 2012-13 dropped to 47, a drop of 53 percent in just two years. And the new teacher's inexperience was apparent. She produced only 8 graduates, while 39 of Nancy W.'s students reached graduation. Despite the imbalance in performance, both teachers continue to be awarded the same number of hours, and no corrective actions or improvement plans have been put in place by Chaparral Unified officials. "I rail about it (teacher underperformance) every year and I have been since I started teaching. The minute I got into a room and saw what was going on, I complained about it to the principal all the time," stated Nancy W. when asked about efforts to address poor teacher performance and its impact on students. "He probably hates me because I'm always like, 'This, I can't stand this. It's not right.' Now the principal looks at me like, 'Oh, she's a pain in my ass'". And the lack of administrative action has created a pessimistic attitude of disbelief in staff members at Osborne, just as I found at the other former high performing sites. "They say they want performance but at the end of the year it does not

matter how well you perform because they never do anything. And they never will. So it just doesn't matter", said Nancy W.

Osborne was the most organized of the three former high performers. Classrooms were clean and kept up, grad boards were prominently displayed in every staff member's room, and all of Nancy W.'s student work was graded the week in which it was turned in. However, in some ways it was the most dysfunctional. The underperformance of the new staff member irked the two productive holdovers and created a schism. The two former high performers had no faith in their coworker, no trust in their site's administrative team, and an even more dim view of the leadership of the Succeed Again program.

Five years of program data indicated that Benoit, Booker, and Osborne were Succeed Again's highest performing sites. Yet what I encountered in my initial visits was disorganization, dysfunction, negativity, high staff turnover, and drastically lowered levels of performance. It was clear that the program, and these sites, were simply not the same places they were before the cuts. Because this study sought to learn what staff members did to generate high performance, it became clear I would need to track down the staff that had generated high levels of graduates. I needed to reconstitute the sites and learn what they *once were* if I wanted to learn how these sites had changed so many students' lives for the better. Rather than speaking to staff about what they *do*, I was going to need to learn about what they *once did* in the past.

After tracking down all the former members of the once high producing sites, a clear picture began to emerge. What I learned was quite different than what I observed during my initial visits to the reconstituted sites. Former coworkers spoke glowingly of their time together, and each noted the impact that their tightly-organized, team-based structure had on their success. Tellingly, all the current and former staff members of Succeed Again spoke of how much they

loved their jobs and the kids they worked with, and how disappointed they were in what had become of the program. The following section details the findings from my interviews with these once high performing teams and their graduates, and provides a road map for best practices that may one day help Succeed Again return to its status as a program that had a significant, positive impact on the educational futures and personal lives of the large number of children who leave Chaparral Unified's schools every year without a diploma.

From Believing to Doing: What the High Performing Sites Taught Me

Three major findings emerged from data gathered at the high performing Succeed Again sites: *High performing staff shared a set of four common beliefs, and from each of these beliefs sprang a mutual set of best practices.* Additionally, *graduates believed Succeed Again served their educational needs better than traditional high schools, positively impacting their lives and their view of education.* Finally, *graduates believe Succeed Again adequately prepared them to succeed in post-secondary educational settings, but that it could do more to ensure their success.* Much of the data leading to the first major finding was obtained through staff interviews. Interviews with program graduates provided an additional window into the beliefs and practices of site staff. This allowed for triangulation of the data collected from staff, as it provided the perspective of the students who experienced the impact of these practices. Interviews with former graduates provided the data leading to the additional major findings. Documents reviewed at the three sites, and from the Succeed Again program as a whole, served to further bolster findings that emerged from the interviews.

This section contains a detailed accounting of the findings from the success case study. Rather than presenting the findings by site, it explores the totality of the experiences of staff and students from all three high performing sites. It examines each of the *four common beliefs*

voiced by effective Succeed Again instructors, and details the *common instructional practices* that developed from each of the beliefs. Additionally, it presents data voiced by graduates from the successful sites examining the impact of the identified best practices upon their educational progress and ability to succeed in post-secondary education.

The First Belief: Graduation and Beyond is the Goal of the Program

Staff members from high performing Succeed Again sites unanimously expressed a core belief that spawned multiple common practices at their sites: that the purpose of Succeed Again was to graduate high school dropouts and prepare them for further academic success. The sentiments of all nine staff members can be found in the words of Erin K., a teacher at Benoit.

That's what we're here to do. We are a high school dropout recovery program. Our goal is to help them get a high school diploma, but not just get a high school diploma but what's the next step after you get a high school diploma? What are you going to do after you graduate?

Maria K., the former consultant at Osborne put it more succinctly when she stated, "Look, what are we doing, if we're not graduating kids?" She continued by stating that the Osborne site had created an almost single-minded, obsessive focus upon the importance of seeing students reach graduation. "We had so many opportunities, and created so many opportunities about graduation. That was all we really talked about. Every single conversation was about graduation."

These conversations surrounding graduation occurred at each of the three high performing sites examined in this study. To provide the "opportunities" mentioned by Maria K., each site engaged in five shared practices that helped to make the goal of graduation a reality. Successful sites *set graduation as the goal, utilized visual representations of success, set a baseline for student admission, established test preparation programs for mandated tests needed for graduation, and engaged in college talk and college action.* And while participants spoke of

the practices being emulated at other sites in the program, each consultant responsible for running the site stated that the practices were initially unique creations at their sites. In other words, although present at all three sites, the practices sprang organically from the teachers and consultants themselves and were not imposed upon them by program leadership.

All three success case sites *set graduation as the goal*. Teachers and consultants at each site informed students that the primary purpose of enrolling at a Succeed Again site was to complete high school and receive a diploma. Staff engaged in this activity immediately, often before a student was even enrolled. Goal setting was present at each of the locations in the form of both site orientations and individual teacher orientations that occurred immediately following a student's enrollment. All three consultants conducted a site orientation where the rules of the program were explained, and students were presented with individual graduation plans that detailed exactly what they needed to do in order to graduate. The plans were detailed, often down to specific assignments and completion timelines, and distributed throughout the sites. Caleb I., the consultant at Benoit spoke of the detailed nature of the grad plans.

We would give them the amount of work equivalent to what they would need to have to do on a weekly basis in order to achieve their graduation goal. If a student wanted to graduate in June we'd already know how many assignments they have to do based on the number of classes that they needed...when we really refined our program, we were able to tell our students, "No matter who you are you'll graduate from this program within four months or less"...(and) all of our teacher assistants had the academic plan. The student had the academic plan. The mom had the academic plan. Everyone was working on that academic plan.

Following site orientations, students would be assigned to specific teachers who would then conduct their own orientations, reemphasizing the grad plan and clarifying their individual expectations as instructors.

Graduates of the three high performing sites spoke often of the clarity the program provided them with understanding how to graduate from high school. Fourteen of the fifteen

students interviewed stated that they knew exactly what they needed to do to finish the program, and twelve specifically cited grad plans as a beneficial aid in their progress toward graduation. And interestingly, twelve of the fifteen graduates contrasted the clarity of the pathway to graduation provided by Succeed Again to the seemingly impassable pathway they faced at their traditional high school. As Kevin Q., a graduate of Osborne Succeed Again put it, “Here, I knew exactly what I needed to do. I did it and I finished. In high school, I showed up, and it sucked. It was so busy, and hectic...It seemed like I was going to fail anyway.” Site documents further illuminated the steps taken to simplify the path to graduation for students. Grad plans provided by two of the three sites included calculators where the total number of assignments needed to complete a course was divided by the number of weeks left in the academic year. This provided students a clear goal for the amount of work they needed to complete, daily, in order to graduate.

Another practice found at each successful site was that staff *utilized visual representations of success*, and each was tied to graduation. Graduation plans were only one of the visual markers of success devised for students. Every successful site in this study utilized graduation boards that tracked each student’s progress through the classes and tests needed to reach graduation. All instructors and consultants reported that course completion credit slips were sent home with each student every time they completed a course. Two sites, Osborne and Booker, had created their own certificates of achievement for course completions. Students received one to take home, and a second was placed on the wall of the classroom. This was also a practice found in the classroom of Benoit’s former consultant, Caleb I., now an instructor at another site. All sites provided standard letters home for parents that stated the progress made by students and updating them on their child’s graduation plan, and all reported holding multiple graduation meetings each year for students considered potential graduates.

Maritza L., the consultant at Booker, summed up the importance of visuals. “I go over our program requirements, I have the paper there on the board and I give them the grad plan, individually, in front of them. Even though I speak, I also want them to see visually what’s going on.” All three sites displayed pictures of the students who had graduated so far that year, as well as graduation photos of past classes. And unique amongst the sites, but notable as another visual tool, was Booker’s practice of having each graduate address the other enrolled students when they complete the program. Maritza L. explained the purpose. “This is our graduate, he did it...we have a lot of grads. It’s doable. I want them to see it. A lot of them don’t believe it.” And all fifteen students interviewed remembered receiving or being influenced by visual representations of success, with one of the graduates from Osborne remarking on the practice’s impact on his persistence. “When you complete a course and they’d have this letter grade, there’s definitely like ‘Okay, I’m chipping away at this.’”

A common practice of success case sites in this study is that they *set a baseline for student admission*. While staff members at the sites shared a belief that all students could be successful, they also realized that success for lower-skilled students required the provision of proper resources, and that the program often lacked them. As a result, each site reported setting a baseline of reading and math skills that applying students had to meet before admission. The sites sought to find students for whom independent study was an appropriate means of education, that could handle the work and make progress toward the end goal. All three high performing sites stated that they set a baseline cutoff for admission of a seventh grade reading level. In addition, students were required to be proficient in low-level, basic math. Each site required students to take a timed test on the multiplication tables where they needed to answer at least 100 basic multiplication problems within a specified amount of time, scoring 85 percent or above.

Documents provided by Succeed Again's former coordinator indicated that the three successful sites held to their practice of not enrolling low performing students. Appendix D presents the average pre-test reading scores for all 26 Succeed Again sites. During the years of data considered for the study, the average reading level of a new student at Booker was an 8.4, at Osborne an 8.8, and at Benoit, enrolling students averaged an 8.0 reading level. No data was available for reviewing the math performance, although all staff interviewed stated that unless a student could demonstrate basic math proficiency by passing the arithmetic test, they would not be admitted. Additionally, the tests themselves were provided to the researcher for documentation.

Benoit's slightly lower reading average might be explained by the presence on campus of additional resources. Caleb I. was the lone consultant at a high performing site to state that he would admit students who arrived with less than a seventh grade reading level. However, he added the corollary that his site had a reading lab available for these students, where reading specialists could tutor them until they were capable of completing independent study work on their own. Caleb also stated that once the site was moved and the reading lab no longer existed, he began to enforce the seventh grade reading level as a hard cutoff. Maria K. at Osborne also suggested some flexibility with the testing levels, stating that she often allowed students to retest if they had scored too low.

I'd TABE test them, and they'd come out with a 4. This was the most normal occurrence. They'd have a 4, or 4.5, and I'd say, "You see which ones you got wrong. You fix them, and let's see what happens." They'd come in at ninth grade. It wasn't that they couldn't read at better than fourth grade, it's that they could not focus...that was the effort level that was going in to it.

She thought flexibility was called for due to the unique makeup of the student population and the imperfection of using standardized testing as a sole metric of a student's potential for success.

Teachers were far less willing to be flexible with the baseline for performance, with all six teachers stating that baselines needed to be set and adhered to. As Benoit's Erin K. put it, "Just because the students are breathing and have a heartbeat, they may not be appropriate for Succeed Again." Five of six cited instances where baselines were not enforced that eroded their ability to provide adequate instruction to both the low scoring students as well as others. Osborne's Nancy W. spoke of these situations when she discussed her time teaching at a low performing Succeed Again site.

They would give me these kids, they could not add or subtract. Didn't know their times tables, and sometimes couldn't read either. Half of independent study is that they have to be able to do work on their own, and with the amount of time we had to help them, and the amount of kids we were supposed to work with, sixty or seventy in a week, over 25 hours? That is like twenty minutes a kid on average. I just truly feel like I don't have enough time to pay as much attention or provide as much instruction as these kids deserve...it's just not doable.

Every teacher interviewed echoed her concerns.

Two other sources of information in this study suggest the necessity of a baseline for admittance may be a viable instructional practice. Among graduates interviewed from high performing sites, ten of fifteen reported struggling with math before they reached Succeed Again, a number that expands to fourteen of twenty when graduates from the counter-case site are included. Yet 18 of 20 reported struggling with math in the post-secondary setting, suggesting that struggling math students were not being prepared for college by the Succeed Again program's math curriculum. And the Chaparral Unified School District's own independent study curriculum mandated certain reading levels be met before enrolling students, even going so far as requiring an eleventh grade reading level for United States Government in an independent study setting.

Succeed Again sites graduating large numbers of students *established specific preparation programs for the state's high school exit exam and the GED test.* All three high

performing sites had developed their own form of test prep for the two tests required for graduation. Prep programs were created by individual instructors at first, and then developed into more formalized processes. Some sites reported different levels of development than others, but all three sites had a codified process in place for preparing students for the mandated exams. The process took place twice yearly at all sites for the state exit exam, and there was an ongoing procedure for GED preparation.

Site documents demonstrated the structured nature of these test preparation programs. All nine staff members at the high performing sites had complete sets of GED sample test booklets, as well as additional books designed to help students reach proficiency on the exam. In addition, all six teachers were in possession of state exit exam preparation materials. All six teachers had the state issued preparation booklets, and each of the six had either developed curriculum on their own, purchased additional materials from test preparation companies, or created hybrids of the two resources. Sessions were conducted at each site in group settings rather than independent study, and lasted for longer than an hour. According to Osborne's Nancy W., "Usually an hour and a half or until their eyes glaze over." All six teachers reported conducting the sessions at least once or more per week for at least six weeks prior to the state exit exam.

Graduates reported the benefits of these preparation sessions. Osborne graduate Derek N. summarized the experiences of many when he spoke about the impact of test prep.

I don't feel like I would probably be in college right now. It's definitely an introduction back into that setting of being able to say, okay, I know I'm going to have an exam coming up. I know I need to study for this. Being reintroduced to lectures and note taking and homework and stuff like that rather than just coming to school once a week and doing whatever it is you want to do the rest of the week.

His feelings were echoed by fourteen of fifteen graduates from the sites. Each reported that the sessions helped them pass the tests, and ten reported that the group classroom settings better prepared them for what they would encounter when they reached college.

Sites that viewed graduation and beyond as the goal *engaged in college talk and took college action*. Each successful site had practices in place related to college going, ranging from formal partnerships with local community colleges where the colleges would conduct outreach and recruitment events, partnerships with government entities that would provide college counseling, sessions where teachers and consultants would aid students with applying to colleges, seminars for completion of the FAFSA financial aid forms, and arranged trips to colleges exposing students to college campuses.

Strongest amongst college-related practices was engaging in college talk. Each of the nine staff reported that doing so was important, and that they made a concerted effort to engage in these conversations with students. Lorena H., a teacher at Booker, related a common conversation.

“Where are you going to go to school? Do you have a plan yet?” They’re like, “I don’t know.” I say, “I heard this school is good. Do you want to go to a university?” I tell them community college is just as great and I heard Obama is trying to do that 2 years of community college for free thing. I say, “If that goes through you are all taking advantage of it. Sorry, I’m not giving you an option.”

She also spoke of the importance of encouraging students because the odds are stacked against them. “Some of them don’t have citizenship so I think they will have to pay out of pocket. Even then, I say, ‘Try to take a couple classes.’ Every bit helps.”

However, of the five graduation and beyond practices, college talk and action had the most limited impact on students. Twelve of fifteen students at strong-performing sites and seventeen of twenty interviewed overall reported that when it came time to go to college, they struggled with the process. Booker’s Teresa M. stated, “I didn’t know what to do at all.”

Benoit's Maria S. concurred. "I didn't know anything. I didn't know how to register. How to do anything." And while eleven of fifteen Succeed Again graduates from high performing sites remembered staff speaking to them about college, the college talk and action seemed to be of little practical use. "I didn't even know how to enroll", said Osborne's Belinda N. "I really didn't have a clue...I was so lost."

During the time I spent at the three successful sites, I noticed no organized display of college-related materials. No financial aid forms were displayed at the sites, and there were no dedicated college advice areas or personnel. The only staff with college materials on hand were two of the consultants, and the materials consisted only of brochures for two local community colleges. And there was an awareness amongst staff that more needed to be done in the arena of college-going. "We did have a method but nothing that I was really satisfied with because I really felt that all our students should go", said Caleb I., the former Benoit consultant. "Nothing really refined to my desires, but we had one."

The Second Belief: Strong Sites are Well Organized and Tightly Structured

All staff interviewed at high functioning Succeed Again sites believed strongly in the following: one key to their success was that they were well organized both as individuals and as a team, and that great care went into designing and maintaining a rigorous structure. Each interviewee spoke at length about the various pieces of their structure and how it led to their success. And while some of the components of their structures may have varied from one site to the next, a strong commonality emerged from the interviews. Successful staff were united by a belief that a key to their success was the organized nature and tight structure of the site. "Everything was very structured and formalized so it was in writing", remarked Caleb I., the former consultant at Benoit. The former consultant at Osborne, Maria K., concurred. "The

system was in place. It was foolproof, and everybody was very relaxed about that, that it ran like a Swiss watch.” And Booker’s consultant Maritza L. completed the triad of site leaders when she remarked simply, “Structure. Structure is one of our strengths. That’s the word.” Comments from teachers at each site echoed those of the consultants. It is true that no two sites were structured, or operated, exactly alike. Yet every successful site was organized and structured around four key practices: *a focus on team building and practice sharing during regularly scheduled staff meetings, involvement of parents as a crucial part of the team, taking immediate action, and developing and enforcing high standards.*

Each successful site *focused on the concept of team building and practice-sharing during scheduled, regular staff meetings.* Staff felt strongly that a key to their success was that they worked together as a team and learned from each other. Further, all nine precisely stated that this team-building and adult learning occurred at regularly scheduled staff meetings. At these successful sites, meetings occurred weekly, and sometimes more often when needed. Seven of nine interviewees noted that a common focus of meetings was graduation. “We would talk about individual kids...It was a lot around graduation, who’s really going to make it, how close are they, what can we do?” remarked Osborne’s Maria K. Practices were shared, according to eight of nine, including Booker’s Lorena H. “During the meetings, everyone works well together. If I have an idea, I’ll tell him or he’ll tell me.” And six of nine remarked that they viewed the meetings as an opportunity to correct things that were not currently working at the site.

Yet it was clear that in addition to the practical benefits of sharing instructional tactics or working towards site improvement, meetings served a core purpose of reinforcing the fact that staff at successful sites work together as a team, and that their opinions are respected and valued. Booker’s consultant Maritza L. expressed these thoughts.

We are very collaborative with staff members. Every Friday we have meetings...I open first by thanking my staff because they are great here...They're the best team. They pick up each other's work. It's not like, "This is her job. This is his job." They help each other, and it's team muscle...I always let my staff talk, and I always let them come up with suggestions.

And Benoit's Helen H. also spoke of the team-based nature of the meetings. "They were very collaborative, very, very collaborative, very small, but even though it was small, it was the best years there. I had so much support. I loved my job there." A full nine of nine interviewees remarked that they felt sites functioned better when there were clear lines of communication in place across all staff. Consistent, scheduled meetings were a key component to making sure this occurred.

The shared structures of successful sites were designed to *involve parents as a crucial part of the team*. High performing staff at the three sites viewed parents as vital components in each student's education. All nine cited strategies they used in order to increase the levels of parent involvement at their site. Phone calls were a unanimously utilized tactic, according to Osborne's Nancy W. "They all, we all know each other. I call the parents enough and whether that is good or bad, I make a point to keep in touch with them and they come in so they know me." The good or bad nature she cited was another common component of parent involvement. Eight of the nine interviewees noted that they consciously contact parents with positive news whenever possible. They did this to counteract the fact that prior school contact with the families of dropouts is negative. Booker's Carlos K. summarized the importance of positive parent contact. "These families have heard the negative for so long, and the kids believe they are failures. They are dropouts. Think about that. It's been a long time since they have thought positively, so we need to seize opportunities." Benoit graduate Nathan S. talked of his high school experiences, and verified the delicate state many students were in when they arrived at

Succeed Again. “I was just unhappy and just the worse I would do the more it would make me not care. I would feel more hopeless.”

In addition to phone calls, notes home, course completion certificates and parent teacher meetings, all of which were cited as strategies utilized by every instructor and consultant, two sites employed a more formal practice known as “Parent Training”. This program was utilized at both Benoit and Osborne where parents enrolling students into the Succeed Again program took classes at the site. Parents were encouraged, at Benoit, and for a while mandated, at Osborne, to attend training sessions geared toward helping them help their children. The sessions took place weekly. The program created the type of parent involvement Osborne’s consultant Maria K. felt was crucial.

In my experience, it was the most important component. Because it created the kind of involvement that...kids would lie, it’s easy to lie to your parents, particularly in independent study. “Parent Training” allowed us to say, “No, he didn’t actually come today. He may have told you that he did, but he didn’t, and so here’s what we need to do.” They’d go, “OK,” and that kid would be there the next day.

However, Osborne instructor Nicole N. had a different view of the program. “I don’t know if it is legal to force a parent to school in order to admit their kid. I’m sure some of them resented it.” Benoit’s Helen H. remembered the program differently, however. “When the program was at its best, they did the parent trainings. A lot of times you’re dealing with students whose parents were never successful at school. They don’t have those habits of mind, at all.”

High functioning Succeed Again sites *took action immediately*. “When did we do that? That day. Immediately!” said Booker teacher Carlos K. when asked about phone calls home if work was not turned in. “You’ve got to call parents right away”, said Benoit’s Helen H. Sites erected best practices to make sure that any struggling students were assessed and aided in a timely manner. According to Helen H., “The workflow had a system that allowed you to stop

students if they needed remediation. If a student is not passing, then you need to jump in early.” Individual grad plans were distributed at all three sites immediately upon a student entering the program, sometimes even before enrollment. Individualized teacher orientation occurred immediately following program orientation. And staff at all three sites cited the importance of correcting student work the week it was turned in. Students in particular noted the importance of this practice, with nine of fifteen mentioning the immediacy and quality of feedback they received. Benoit graduate Maria S. cited the difference between the way work was handled at Succeed Again and her original high school. “In high school, nobody cared. I was in a class with 50 students. I never got my homework back. (At Benoit), I got my essays back the next week, sometimes the same day.”

Because they believed structure was a part of their success, Succeed Again sites with high graduation rates all *developed and enforced high standards*. Each high performing site believed that strong performance was borne out of a culture of high standards that pertained to actions of all interested stakeholders, be they site staff, students, or parents. As such, they developed and enforced standards of behavior and habits of work. At times common, sometimes unique, all sprang from a shared belief that high standards led to high performance, and that enforcing these standards was crucial to success.

Students were held accountable at all three sites. Often, it was the consultant’s role as the manager of the site to make sure that students understood the rules and adhered to them. Each of the sites utilized a “Point System” structure of behavioral and work management for students. The system was developed at Osborne, and later adopted by the entire Succeed Again Program. Some sites utilized it, while others did not. The successful sites in this study all utilized the system. When a student did not turn in work for a week, they were assessed a point, and a phone

call was immediately placed to the parent. At Booker, they made the student make the call and confess to the parent that they had not turned in assignments. A second week of missed work brought a second point, a second phone call, and a letter home to parents. A third missed week in a row yielded a third point, and a mandatory intervention conference with staff, student and parent. A fourth point was cause for dismissal from the program. Students could remove a half point from their record each week they turned in work on time. Their weekly assignment packet, that had to be signed off on by parents, indicated their total number of points.

High performing sites utilized this system with regularity, but also understood there was a need for flexibility. The consultants played the role of the heavy. “Caleb was very, very strict. When Caleb took over, I think he became even stricter on the four point conference than we were before”, said Benoit’s Helen H. Booker’s consultant Maritza L. spoke of the need to play the role of enforcer.

We’re very strict...with this population of students, with us being a recovery program, you need to really be strict, very strict...I just tell them, “If you don’t turn in your work, unfortunately, we don’t have any more chances. We’re here for motivated students, and if you don’t there are students waiting in the line. We have to take them.” We’re very strict and we know the procedures...and the consultant before me, she was very strict.

Teachers at the sites expressed a desire for this level of strict enforcement from consultants. Osborne’s Nancy W. spoke of the benefits of tying aberrant actions to consequences. “Look, these kids come to us for a reason, they’re dropouts so we’re perpetuating the dropout cycle by not having structure or consequence.” She contrasted her experience at Osborne with her time at an underperforming site. “There was no structure. There was no, ‘if you do this, this will happen to you.’ It was more like, ‘Go spin your sad tale to the consultant and then you get to come right back.’ It was ridiculous. Impossible to manage the class.”

Each teacher interviewed said they appreciated a rigid structure, saw it as beneficial, and wanted to see strict consultants at their sites. However, five of six admitted that they would at times enforce structure, particularly the Point System, in a lax manner. Despite her negative experiences at her earlier jobsite with a weak consultant, Osborne's Nancy W. stated, "I follow the point system loosely...It's a touch and feel thing. If they get to four points I will start discussing dropping them...but it's really student by student." Five teachers admitted they were flexible with the system, and tried to fit any consequences to the particular student. "You have to understand their individual situations", said Booker's Carlos K. "Besides, sometimes I could play good cop, bad cop with the consultant and get more work out of the kid by pretending to sympathize. You needed the right touch."

High standards did not apply only to students. Staff were subject to the same levels of scrutiny. Six of nine people interviewed spoke of the expectation that Succeed Again employees should work hard and be well educated, and felt the absence of these two qualities was a clear reason others in the program were unsuccessful. Benoit's Caleb I. spoke of holding his staff to his own high expectations.

I thought about how to motivate my staff. We developed a family environment that was structured where everyone knew what the parameters were and what the expectations were. We took pride in what we were doing...we tried very hard not to spend energy doing things outside of what would be considered professional activities at a workplace. No gossip. No anything other than we're here to help our students graduate. That's what we do all day long every day and how can we do that better?

Each of his instructors not only mentioned Caleb's focus on their development and professionalism, but also described him as a "great leader".

Facilities and their care and maintenance were a final piece of the high-structure/high-standards mentality mentioned as a key component of success. Six of nine interviewees felt that the care and maintenance of facilities played a crucial role in creating a proper learning

environment. All six thought that having well maintained, clean facilities made students feel welcome and cared for. Multiple students concurred, contrasting the overcrowded classrooms of their former high schools with the finer surroundings at their respective Succeed Again site. Benoit's Caleb I. stated that he focused on "creating an environment that's clean. That was essential to our program. We had a very nice campus. It was well equipped. We had all the materials we needed." After the district moved his site for the second time in three years, he could not face rebuilding again, and gave up control of the site to work as a teacher. "I just couldn't rebuild again. It was too much."

The Third Belief: The Largest Challenge for Students is Life and Poor Educational Opportunities, Not Themselves

The educational performance of teens prone to dropout behavior is affected by a great number of societal factors. Among these factors are poverty, homelessness, and broken family structures due to absent parents (Orfield, 2004; Rumberger, 2011). Seventeen of twenty former graduates interviewed for this study stated they had engaged in forms of delinquency as a high school student, with some tracing the behaviors back to their middle school years. Forms of delinquency included drug and alcohol abuse, fighting, self-mutilation and other types of harmful, aberrant behavior. When reflecting on the behavior, graduates cited the negative impact these activities had on their educational success, and many traced the root of the behaviors to problems at home. The parents of several students interviewed from the success cases in this study were absent from their lives due to drug abuse, mental illness, divorce, and incarceration. According to Benoit graduate Maria S., problems at home had an extremely negative impact on her ability to succeed in school.

My dad went to jail, so I had to move. I had to lose all my friends. I really didn't care about school. I thought it was a waste of time. My mom was just going through a hard time when my dad went to jail, so my mom didn't really care

much about me at that time, so when I came to tenth grade, that's when I just didn't care about anything either.

That year, Maria S. dropped out of high school, and six months later, enrolled in Succeed Again. She graduated and moved on to college, although during her time in the program, she became pregnant and gave birth to a child out of wedlock.

Interviews conducted with staff at Succeed Again sites demonstrated strongly that people who worked at high performing sites had a clear understanding of the many challenges facing the students they were tasked with educating. This knowledge forged in teachers and consultants a unified belief that the largest challenge facing these students was life and poor prior educational opportunities, not themselves or their ability. Staff saw mitigating these factors as a part of their job, and felt success in this arena was a key to getting students through the program and on to college. Because of their keen understanding and belief that life challenges facing students were the chief obstacles to academic success, employees at all three sites developed four key practices. High performing Succeed Again staff *let students know they cared, maintained an awareness of prior negative educational experiences, allowed for flexibility, and sought to select staff with appropriate skill levels.*

Multiple common practices were in place at each of the three sites that helped teachers and consultants *let students know they cared.* All six teachers at the three sites utilized individual student orientations where they met with the student individually for more than fifteen minutes at a time immediately upon having the student assigned to them. Formal teacher/student orientation meetings are not a part of the Succeed Again program structure, but they do exist at each of the high performing sites. All teachers mentioned that they sought to do several things during the orientation: learn why a student had dropped out of school, learn about the individual students and their family, and maintain a positive attitude. Booker's Carlos K. summed up the

importance of the practice. “Each of these kids has a problem that is causing them to drop out. How can you fix the problem if you don’t know what it is? How can you know what it is if you don’t ask?”

In addition to learning what a student’s academic difficulties may be, these individual orientations and subsequent conversations between teacher and student served as a means of forging a strong personal connection. Each teacher interviewed stated that they tried to learn about the student during conversations. Benoit’s Helen H. described her initial intake sessions and follow up conversations.

When they initially came in, I would ask, “What did you do to get here? What happened that you ended up here?” You look at their scores and say, “Oh, you like math but you don’t like to read. What’s going on there?” Then you just learn about them over the course of the time with them, what they’re interested in, what they like to read. Because I was always teaching English you try to help them read books they were interested in. That becomes a conversation too.

And Benoit’s other teacher, Erin K., stated the purpose of these meetings and forging the personal connection succinctly. “They need to know that someone cares, because some of them would come from not so nice backgrounds....if they don’t feel that they can come to you, then they’re not going to.” Conversations between staff and students, while often centered on academics, frequently turned to life-related issues, and eight of nine staff members said they strove to discuss life with their students. “You have to know, you can’t treat every kid like they’re the same, because they’re not”, said Osborne’s Nancy W. “A girl that’s pregnant but wanted to go to high school but can’t is a huge difference than a kid that just wasn’t interested in school.” Knowledge gained from these sessions and conversations impacted the teaching strategies of staff at all three sites. Staff sought to take what they learned about the students and have that knowledge inform not only what they taught, but how they taught it. High performing

instructors unanimously viewed the connections they forged with students as integral to their success.

Student interviews confirmed that these strategies were effective. Nineteen of twenty program graduates in this study felt they had a personal connection with their teacher, and sixteen described the connection as “strong”. Nine of fifteen graduates from successful sites spoke of the “care” they received from their teachers. Booker grad Selena T. spoke about her teacher, Carlos K. “He actually cared about the students and not just like a robot. He just showed that he cared. And if students saw that they cared then students are going to take advantage.” And Osborne graduate Belinda N. pointed out the effectiveness of the life conversations when she described the effect of talking about life with Nancy W. “Her talking to me really just made me think like, okay, you need to cut it out with your friends. Stop going out. Stay home and do your work. And that really helped me.”

These views contrasted sharply with educational experiences at Succeed Again graduates’ original high schools. Eighteen of twenty interviewees had negative views of their educational institutions prior to enrolling in Succeed Again. Some of these views were profoundly negative. Graduates frequently referred to their original high schools as “jails” full of people who just “did not care”. “I hated being stuck in a place for eight hours. I hated being told I had to be there for no reason, just because it’s the right thing to do”, said Benoit’s Brenda T. Chilton’s Cynthia S. described her high school. “I can remember going to math class and watching movies. Because the teachers didn’t want to teach us shit. They just didn’t care.” All nine high performing staff members stated that as a practice, they *maintained an awareness of prior negative educational experiences*. This awareness caused a heightened sensitivity in their minds to the need to be positive when addressing students. “I always tried, even when

addressing problematic behavior or performance, to be solution-oriented, to be positive”, said Booker’s Carlos K. At the same site, teacher Karina G. utilized a similar strategy when dealing with parents. “Sometimes they’re a little negative and the parents will seem upset or aggressive. I say, ‘Your son, your daughter, they’re great kids.’ I tell them all the good stuff, not just the bad stuff.” Every successful staff member said that having an understanding of the prior negative educational experiences of their students altered their approach.

Because of their belief that students’ largest problems were caused by life rather than themselves, high performing Succeed Again employees *allowed for flexibility*. Teachers were especially strong believers in this practice, with all six stating they sought to allow students leeway precisely because they understood the challenges these children faced in their lives. Some were lenient with the point system, five of the six stated that they would accept occasional life-related excuses from students in lieu of work as long as they believed the student to be truthful, and four of six teachers were willing to allow students time off from all studies during the program if the situation warranted it. Benoit’s Helen H. stated that her experience with and knowledge of students’ lives made her take a more holistic approach to discipline and fight to keep children in the program that might just need a break.

I honestly believe that most of these students who were there were there for reasons that are things beyond their control or emotional things. As a matter of fact, one of the things that Succeed Again made me think is, “Isn’t it interesting that we expect someone to be able to go through four years of life without any crisis, without anything that’s going to make them depressed for a couple months, and that’s going to make them falter, or their dad loses their job, or whatever it is that happens?” I think it’s funny because as adults, we know. When was the last time you had a four year period in your life where you didn’t have some major thing happen that derails you a little bit?

And two consultants, often forced to play the heavy as managers of the site, expressed regret that they may not have been more lenient or shown more patience. “I had a quick temper, and I was

very confrontational with these kids”, said Osborne’s Maria K. “I’m sure I didn’t serve the kids in that way at all.”

Close examination of program data confirms teacher flexibility. During the 2009-10 and 2010-11 school years, the three successful sites maintained turn-in percentages of over 78 percent. That meant that in any given week, greater than 78 percent of students were turning in packets of work to their instructors. However, 63 percent of students enrolled at the three sites went at least one week without turning in work during that time period, and 42 percent failed to turn in work for two or more weeks in a row. That these students were able to correct course and continue progressing academically suggests that teacher flexibility is a viable practice, particularly with this population of students.

The belief that students had been ill served by their prior educational institutions caused successful sites to adopt a practice of *seeking to hire staff with appropriate skill levels*. All three consultants at the sites stated they looked for teachers that were well versed in all applicable subject matter. Seven of the nine high performing staff stated that they felt it was important for staff to have a strong educational background. Former Benoit consultant Caleb I. summed up the feelings of many. “I think formalized education is important. I think any teacher should have K-12 learning experience. You should know understand how to utilize a variety of methodologies.”

Many of the responses concerning the need for adequately prepared teachers emanated from discussions of why students might not be learning at high schools and at low performing Succeed Again sites. “I don’t know how to say this without being rude. I think there are a lot of teachers in this program that probably shouldn’t be teachers”, stated Osborne’s Nancy W. “I think it’s basic, general knowledge that a lot of teachers don’t have, and I’m talking about course

work, like how do you teach Algebra, how do you write an essay.” Booker’s Carlos K. was not alone in addressing the shortfalls of some former colleagues. “Oh my God. They couldn’t write a paragraph. Not a proper paragraph. Some couldn’t multiply, or *solve* an algebra problem. Never mind *teach* it.”

In order to provide the education they believed their students deserved, two of the three consultants stated they had adopted means of getting rid of ineffective teachers that had been placed at their sites. Strategies included speaking with principals, consulting the Succeed Again program coordinator, and even going so far as to alert the Chaparral Unified Superintendent and Board Members. Benoit’s Helen H. spoke of Caleb I.’s tactics for getting rid of instructors.

The other thing I will tell you really frankly is that Caleb was able to push out low performing teachers. He did it. He wasn’t supposed to. Everybody knew he wasn’t supposed to, but he made their lives miserable and they left. Those people then went to other sites and you could see they went to lower performing sites....One woman absolutely could not do the job. She’d be losing student work. She just couldn’t do the job. Caleb was just a constant, “What’s happening, why didn’t you make your numbers? What’s going on?”

Helen H. stated that that teacher left after a semester. Caleb I. summed up his feelings regarding finding proper staff. “You have to be willing to do what you need to do, not what you are supposed to be allowed to do, to get kids the services and education they deserve.”

The Fourth Belief: Staff Should Work to Improve Their Own Sites, and the Program Should Follow Suit

Staff at the three high performing sites in this study all espoused the belief that although they were strong performers, they could always improve, and that seeking to do so was a part of the job. They voiced very strong opinions about how the absence of this belief from other program sites and from overall program leadership was harming the Succeed Again program in its current iteration. In order to continually generate site improvement and enhance educational

outcomes, high performing staff *improvised and created, sought outside partnerships, prioritized time as a valuable resource, and avoided negative practices they saw in others.*

Improvisational practices were abundant at the three success cases, and all came with no directive from overall Succeed Again leadership. Each site had developed state exit exam and GED test preparation programs, and teachers had created specialized curriculum to lead the prep sessions. Additional self-created curricular supplements were in abundant supply at the sites. Five of six teachers had created writing rubrics that aided their students with essay construction. Five of six instructors had sought out additional math instruction materials either in stores or online. Two of the sites had created special reward systems for students, such as specially-designed course completion certificates. All three sites had broken course materials up and placed them into specifically designed binders so that students would no longer have to borrow multiple books. Every single high performing site had spent resources on a wide variety of novels that provided students reading choices from outside of the normal program curriculum. And all three sites offered college information sessions that were not provided at other sites, or by the overall Succeed Again program. “You make do with what you have. Then when you don’t have what you need, you invent”, stated Osborne teacher Nicole N. “You need to do what works”, according to Booker’s Carlos K. “Because a lot of the things they give us don’t work on their own.”

Of particular note within these practices was the manner in which each successful site sought to be creative with math instruction. Seven of nine staff members and sixteen of twenty students believed that the form of math pedagogy provided by the Succeed Again independent study design was weak and ineffective. “The new Algebra is long and difficult and I don’t like the book”, said Benoit instructor Erin K. “You’re asking children who struggle with math to

essentially learn Algebra on their own.” Each of the three sites had designed specific modules or strategies to get their students the math instruction they needed. Booker had arranged their staff hours so that teachers would be on hand for long portions of the day to provide math instruction for a larger span of hours. In addition, they created small group modules where students would be moved along at the same pace but attend in person to work on skills with the instructor and three other students. At Benoit and Osborne, the sites successfully lobbied for additional funding to be provided so they could teach all math classes in a teacher-directed environment.

Students spoke glowingly of the teacher-directed courses. Ten students who were interviewed for this study had participated in them, and all ten cited them as positive experiences that increased their learning. They each stated that the courses allowed them to get through the class faster, and to learn more. While eight of the ten stated that they still had trouble with math in the college setting, they all felt that they had learned a great deal more math in a group setting than through independent study. Additionally, eight of the ten reported that the teacher-directed setting had an added benefit of helping to prepare them for the classroom environment of college. Derek N. of Osborne remarked spoke of the college-going benefits. “It was structured like a college class and I learned a lot of things that I can apply to college in that class. That class helped me a lot to get into college and do well in college.” And Helena T., also an Osborne grad, concurred. “I feel like if I didn’t have that kind of introduction back into what being in a classroom setting is, I probably would’ve freaked out the first week of being in college and been like ‘I don’t wanna do this’.

Partnerships with outside organizations were present at each of the high performing sites examined in this study. All three sites had partnerships with at least one college, and two were partnering with more than one institution. The partnerships included recruitment events at the

Succeed Again campus, trips to college campuses, assistance with financial aid forms, and admissions and application advice. Booker and Osborne had partnered with outside entities to supply books for their sites so that students would have additional reading materials. Booker's Maritza L. spoke about the partnership she established to bring books to campus.

We have a book truck here. I don't know if you've heard about the book truck ladies, they bring in books? I had numbers for them. I called, the people were no longer there. However, they referred me to other people. I tracked them down. This is the third time they are going to be here, and it has been a great success. A lot of students are interested in a lot of books. They give free books to them...ask them, "What books do you like? What genres do you read?" Then they give them to the kids for free. I referred them to other consultants, and the ladies told me not one of them called.

Partnerships existed at all three sites with various social agencies. The agencies provided healthcare information, free birth control, would often assist with paying for or defraying the cost of the GED, and helped students to find employment and housing when needed.

All sites that believed they could improve and worked toward that goal shared another particular instructional practice. Eight of nine staff interviewed at the three high performing sites cited the importance of time, or the impact created by a lack of time on their ability to successfully educate students. All of these staff members *prioritized time as an important resource*. The first sign of prioritization was that they were conscious that the availability of time impacted student achievement. Literally every successful staff member referred to time as a resource, almost in the way that they would view instructional materials or site budgets. "I have to constantly remain aware of how much time I have, and what the best use of it is going to be", said Osborne's Nicole N. "It's simple", remarked her colleague, Nancy W. "You only have a certain amount of time. If you waste it, students don't get served. Too few people seem to put this up front in their heads in this program."

The recent cuts to the program had generated a large impact on the availability of time. Succeed Again employees were paid on an hourly basis. Many teachers and consultants had seen their hours cut down from 30 hours per week in 2009 to 20 hours or fewer by the 2013-14 school year. This reduction in work hours not only caused a great deal of consternation, but also, at least at the strong performing sites, spurred more innovation. Staff members sought to create ways to achieve the same impact despite the constraints of their newly reduced capacity.

Booker's Lorena L. spoke of the need to be creative.

Sometimes it's the time. You don't have enough time. Sometimes I wish I had more time with my students. That frustrates me. I'll go home and I'm angry. I'm like, "I have to figure out how to do it." That's why I am always trying to do a few things at home or make things that are more time efficient so I have more time for them. I don't want them to feel rushed out, so I need to be more creative and prioritize what I do.

Teachers at sites described their efforts to move toward more group work whenever they could, and four spoke of how they began to "hyper-organize" their workspaces as time began to disappear. "I have everything within arm's reach, organized into binders so I can find anything I need within five seconds", said Booker's Carlos K. "Any instructional material that pops into my head, I make sure it is there and available. If I lose three minutes getting up to find it, that is three minutes I lose with a kid."

Teachers and consultants at successful sites also *sought to avoid the negative practices they saw in others*. They did this both because they believed that it was their job to work towards site improvement, but also because they believed poor employee effort was undermining the Succeed Again Program. Eight of the nine high performing staff interviewed for this study held strong, negative opinions about many of the employees that worked for Succeed Again, and particularly of program leadership. All felt that overall program improvement could occur, but that there was absolutely no plan in place to make it happen. Eight of nine held negative

opinions of overall program leadership, describing those who run the program as “weak”, “absent”, “clueless”, “ignorant”, “lazy”, and “idiotic”. Osborne’s Maria K. spoke vividly of a prior leader of the program.

We had poor leadership. No leadership, actually. It seemed like egos got in the way of, pride got in the way of honesty, and she was afraid of being seen as weak, so she wouldn’t ask for help, and couldn’t depend on the people who really wanted to run a good program...It was her own ego, her own pride that kept us from being successful. She just wasn’t with it very much, and refused to admit that. When the cuts came, she didn’t know what to do, and she didn’t even understand what she was saying. She was so wrong about everything, and so misinformed. She had no control of the situation. Don’t get me started on this woman.

Opinions of the newer, current leadership elicited similar responses.

Negative behaviors that high performing staff saw in others that they sought to avoid included “laziness”, “giving up”, “not doing a damn thing”, “not caring about kids”, “putting your feet up”, “resting on the hours that tenure guarantees you”, and most importantly, “not caring about doing a good job and not caring about the kids you are supposed to educate.” Five staff decried the overall preparedness of the Succeed Again teaching corps, believing them to be uneducated. Osborne’s Nancy W. spoke for the majority of high performing instructors.

It seems normal to me that if you’re going to be teaching ten different subjects, then you should know how to teach them. You should know what it is that they’re asking you to teach. If your writing skills suck and you’re trying to teach a student to write a composition, where does that leave everyone? It doesn’t make any sense to me... We have people who for the life of them can’t do any math whatsoever, so they just absolutely avoid teaching the subject because they don’t understand it themselves. Where does that leave you? Where does that leave the program? If you can’t even do it yourself, where does that leave the kids you are supposed to be teaching?

While her comment was among the more strident in tone, many echoed its sentiment.

Interviews with success case staff generated a number of suggestions for how to improve the program. Eight of nine suggested replacing program leadership. Nine of nine felt that the program should develop and communicate a clear mission. Not a single one of the twelve

interviewees for this study could name the Succeed Again's stated program mission. All twelve stated they didn't know it, although they believed they had heard it. When asked what the mission of the program should be, they replied with twelve different answers. High performing staff were unanimous in the opinion that program cuts should be made on a performance basis. Those sites that were performing well should keep their funding levels, those that were not should lose hours in the event of a cut, or be closed. Nine of nine advocated for a merit-based system of awarding hours to teachers and sites. Eight of nine cited a complete absence of professional development, and nine of nine called for it to be provided. Seven of nine advocated for a more formalized program structure that would cause sites to function in the same manner, and the same number called for sites to be given the ability to hire people with the right skills to do the job and move out those who could not. The nine were unanimous in calling for more distribution of and use of program data, although seven of them cautioned that more attention needed to be paid to ensuring the integrity of program data. There was a shared opinion that certain sites and employees were faking data and claiming work from students that was not consistent with the program's educational mission. These seven felt it was too simple to falsify a site's data, and that cheating was rampant.

The Graduates' Belief: Succeed Again Changes Student Perceptions of Education for the Better. It is a Viable and Necessary Pathway for College Success, but Can Do More

The staff at high performing Succeed Again sites stated the purpose of the program was to help their students graduate and to prepare them to succeed in post-graduate settings. However, many of them admitted to not really thinking a great deal about whether or not they were actually accomplishing this task, and all nine admitted that they had absolutely no metric for measuring whether they met this self-stated goal. The only evidence they had gathered over the years regarding the effectiveness of Succeed Again as a means for college preparation were

some random stories they heard from returning graduates concerning their progress, or lack thereof, in college. “I do think about it, and I’d like to know more, but it would take a lot of time to assemble that information”, said Osborne’s Nicole N. “The program does nothing to provide that information, but they really should be looking into it. It’s something we need to know”, stated former Osborne consultant Maria K.

Yet interviews made clear that staff at high performing sites held a belief that what they were doing to educate students through Succeed Again was preparing them to succeed in college. All nine of the staff agreed. Yet all nine also stated they had made modifications to the Succeed Again program, such as the provision of teacher-directed math classes, or increasing the rigor of essay writing that the program provided, in order to further what kids were going to need in college. “Not all of our kids will go to college”, said Osborne’s Nancy W. “Not all of them will need to go. But they should sure as hell be able to expect to go and succeed if we give them a diploma.”

This study conducted interviews with fifteen Succeed Again graduates from the three high performing sites. The research was designed to help teachers and the program better understand the impact they were having on students’ abilities to succeed in postsecondary settings. However, in gathering the data to answer the research question pertaining to college readiness, additional strong findings began to emerge from the stories of the graduates. Chief among these was that *participation in the Succeed Again program changed graduates’ perceptions of education for the better.*

Each student interviewed for this project entered his or her respective Succeed Again site with a negative view of education. Participation in and graduation from the program altered their view of education from negative to positive. This finding is present in fourteen of the fifteen

interviews I conducted. Although they were not specifically asked about their perceptions of school prior to Succeed Again, or about whether their perceptions had shifted after exposure to the program, each of the students' stories of their lives conformed to a specific arc: the student had a negative perception of education and schools while in their high school, that perception shifted during or after their exposure to Succeed Again, and today they have an appreciation for education and a desire to achieve.

Negative views of their original high schools were present in the experiences of all fifteen interviewees. Overcrowding and poor condition of school facilities was a common refrain. Benoit graduate Maria S. described her original high school as a place where “nobody cared. I was in a class with 50 students. I didn't have my own seat. Textbooks were old. Teachers didn't really care.” Ten of the fifteen graduates stated that in their original schools, they were failing to learn anything. According to Booker's Nadia K., “I wasn't learning anything. They would just give you worksheets. You didn't learn anything, so it was pointless.”

While negative perceptions of facilities and the schools themselves colored many of the graduate interviews, negativity intensified as program graduates discussed the teachers and counselors that staffed their old high schools. Ten of fifteen graduates reported that problems with former teachers and counselors were a key component of their dislike for school. Several noted that they were told early on in their academic careers that they were going to fail, and that these comments had a negative impact. Osborne's Helena T. noted the impact of these experiences. “When someone tells you you're not going to graduate and you're only a freshman, it's like, ‘Well, why should I do this if I've already been told by somebody I'm not going to graduate?’” Osborne's Kevin Q. described his clash with a teacher.

I already hated that guy. Basically, he yelled all this shit at me, and I told him that I didn't even want to be in the honors classes so he had to step back, and chill

out. I mean when teachers act like that, I just didn't care so much. I was just like whatever. I didn't want to be there, and if they didn't want me there, that was fine.

Each of these stories made it clear that teacher comments, even offhanded ones, weighed heavily with these young students.

Thirteen of the fifteen students interviewed stated the absence of care was something that generated their negative perception of high school. These students believed strongly that their prior schools, teachers and counselors simply did not care about them. This in turn led to their own lack of care for their academic performance and school attendance.

Graduate recollections of Succeed Again yield the exact opposite finding. As noted previously in this chapter, nine of the fifteen graduates from high performing sites noted the amount of "care" they received from their instructor, the site, and the program. They stated that this perception of having a caring adult on their side allowed them to make better academic progress, and kept them coming to school. Most importantly, it started them caring about their education and their future once again. Benoit's Maria S. noted this when she stated, "I knew it was for a purpose. It wasn't like high school where they make you do homework, and they don't even collect it because they don't care to grade it sometimes." Booker's Teresa M. spoke of her time in high school and said, "In high school, you just sit. I wasn't actually going there to learn. You're just *sitting* there in class." This view contrasted strongly with her recollection of Booker Succeed Again. "I knew I was going to finish there. Just the one-on-one talks, and her giving me my work and knowing that you're moving forward. You're just focused on what you're doing."

Teresa's story was the norm, not the exception, for the students interviewed in this study. They had entered Succeed Again as dropouts profoundly disenchanted with education and schools, and graduated as students who sought higher levels of education. And for most

graduates interviewed in this study, education continues to play a role in their life years after finishing Succeed Again. Fourteen of fifteen graduates from high performing sites are enrolled in a post-secondary institution, have graduated from two year programs, or completed degrees at four-year institutions. *Succeed Again graduates believe that the program is a viable and necessary pathway to postsecondary success.*

Overwhelmingly, the twenty graduates of Succeed Again interviewed for this study reported that they had succeeded or were succeeding in college. Of the twenty, seventeen had either graduated or were continuing with their educations. Two had left for financial reasons. They took a job because they needed money, and now were content to stay within the working world. One other left because she had decided college was not for her, although she spoke of returning in the future. As all interviewees were currently into their second year or beyond in college, the persistence rate of this group calculates to 85 percent. This beats the national average of 68.7 percent reported in 2014 by the National Student Clearinghouse Research Center. Given that most students in this study began their post Succeed Again Career in two-year institutions, where the average persistence rate is only 57 percent, and that persistence for low-income students is historically lower than the average rate, the impact of the Succeed Again program on graduates' college persistence is clearly positive.

All except one student interviewed reported they performed well in higher education and achieved high grades. There are students who have graduated from programs with honors, others who have been awarded a place on the Dean's list or received similar accolades, students who have been guaranteed transfer to four year colleges or already transferred, and numerous students who report achieving A's in the college classroom. This high level of performance increased student positivity about education since they have left Succeed Again and moved on to higher

education. Fourteen of the fifteen interviewees from high performing sites mentioned feeling good about their higher education experience, and education in general. This is a marked change from their perceptions of education prior to their time at Succeed Again.

More importantly for the Succeed Again program, a majority of the graduates tied their success in college directly to their involvement with Succeed Again. Twelve of fifteen reported that they felt adequately prepared to handle the academic demands of the postsecondary world, and eleven of them directly referenced things Succeed Again had done that were helping them in college. Osborne's Belinda N. cited one of these instances.

Look, I learned how to study there. Independent study, is, like, most of college, right? So I had missed a few classes because I was sick, and I went in there and I was *so lost*, like I was *really, really* lost. I knew nothing about what the teacher was talking about, and I had a test Thursday, and I knew I couldn't ask him because it's college and he'd be like, "No. It's your fault for not showing up." But I went back home, and I started looking through the book, and I was like, "Hey, this is just like Succeed Again. Go back to Chapter 6, go back to Chapter 7, read over it, study it. Memorize it. Learn how to do it." I went back that Thursday and got an A minus on that test, because of what I knew how to do.

Students like Belinda cited three specific Succeed Again experiences as critical to their college success. They felt that they knew how to study and handle the independent nature of college better because of their experiences in independent study. Succeed Again graduates believed that they had learned to better manage their time as a result of participating in independent study. And all ten graduates exposed to the teacher directed classes at Osborne and Benoit stated those classes positively impacted their ability to succeed in college by re-exposing them to the classroom environment that was not normally a part of Succeed Again.

This strong performance on the post-secondary level is caused a palpable shift in students' perceptions of themselves. There was a carry-over effect from their academic performance into their vision of who they are as a person and their value as a human being.

Osborne's Brian N. was indicative of many interviewees when he stated:

God, I felt like such a fucking loser. Like I couldn't even get out of high school. Then when I got to college, I was like, oh man, I don't know if I can do this. And when I did it, I can't even tell you, it was like, God, man, I was just so fucking proud of myself, that I had done something that I used to just suck at and finished. With honors.

Not all reflections about Succeed Again's impact on college going were positive. While interviewees did believe Succeed Again was a viable and necessary pathway to postsecondary success, *graduates also believed that the program can do better in helping them prepare for and transition to college.* There was an academic problem that surfaced in these interviews. Many Succeed Again graduates reported continuing struggles with math. Twelve of the fifteen mentioned having problems with math, and feeling as though they lacked the skills they needed to further their progress in college. This is a troubling finding, as it squares up with the literature suggesting poor math skills are a hindrance for students attempting to leave the community college level and progress to success on the university level.

Also consistent with research in the subject, the graduates I interviewed reported problems with the process of knowing how to go, or actually going, to college. Eight of the subjects interviewed cited low class-availability as something that was affecting their college education, while thirteen of the fifteen said they lacked knowledge about the application and registration process. The two that did know how to apply and enroll were helped by siblings who had recently been through the process themselves. "I did not have a clue", was a statement that appeared in numerous interviews where students discussed the application and enrollment process. Benoit's Maria S. said, "I didn't know anything. I would go to the customer service, and I would ask them, "What am I supposed to do? I don't know how to register. How to do anything." And Benoit's Natalie W. had a similar experience.

It was overwhelming. I was like, "Wow, I really have to do a lot on my own." Registering for this, signing up for that. At first it was like, "Jesus. I got to figure this out and I got to go talk to someone, figure more out and then I got to sign up

with them. I wasn't prepared for the whole signing up and getting enrolled and the whole applying for financial aid thing and it was partly my fault. I'm guessing that you could get help from a counselor, but I didn't know if we had that there. It was awful.

Succeed Again graduates felt that they were ill-served by the program with regards to matriculating to college, with thirteen of fifteen students interviewed responding that they had received limited to no information regarding college from Succeed Again. Notably, this was the sole mention, in any of the interviews, where a student felt a traditional high school was performing in a more positive manner than Succeed Again, because high schools have college counselors and Succeed Again does not. This is a troubling finding for two additional reasons. First, all fifteen of these students attended high performing Succeed Again sites that had formal college-going procedures in place, according to the instructors. This suggests that aspect of the program is having a limited impact, if any at all. Second, many low performing sites have no college outreach partnerships, suggesting the vast majority of Succeed Again students are possibly encountering even more problematic experiences when attempting to matriculate to college.

The former graduates did have suggestions for how this program deficiency might be addressed. All fifteen interviewees called for more college information to be delivered to students throughout their time in Succeed Again. Suggestions as to what type of information students would like ran the gamut from simple information about college types to help with preparing actual applications to assistance with financial aid form preparation. Also of note is a call from former graduates to create a college preparation class. Multiple graduates suggested that a formal class be created that would help students with the path from Succeed Again to college. Former graduates unanimously expressed the need to provide students with the multi-faceted information necessary for them to negotiate the labyrinth of going to college. It is

crucially important that a program such as Succeed Again provide this information due to the fact that it deals with so many students who fall into the first-time graduate, low-SES category. According to the literature, this population of students not only struggles to get to college, but also struggles to succeed once they are there.

The Counter-Case: Chilton Succeed Again

My early February visit for initial data collection at Chilton Succeed Again brought a sense to me, for the first time upon arriving at a Succeed Again site, that there may actually be some type of dropout recovery project occurring behind the gates of the school. Several small groups of African-American and Latino late-teenaged youth hung around just outside the main gate of the campus. A few smoked, and leaned against a ten-foot high metal fence. Others talked and laughed. But all carefully watched new arrivals that approached the gates of the school, as well as the long, flat, concrete vistas of the sidewalks running east and west past the campus. The central city, highly urbanized location of Chilton added to an atmosphere of controlled chaos: cars sped rapidly past me on the wide boulevard where the front gate was located, and three police cruisers and an ambulance were parked, with the ambulance lights flashing, just down the road from the school. A woman walked past holding a laundry hamper full of candy and attempted to sell some to the teens loitering outside the gate. They seemed happier to continue smoking, the only attention they paid her a collection of blank stares.

Chilton was the first Succeed Again location where I would find groups of students hanging out around the campus, and also the first and only site where I would witness a student give some attitude to an adult. Shortly after my arrival, as I watched the scene at the front gate, a chime rang. Two security guards, previously sequestered inside a guard shack, made their way out onto the campus. As one worked the front sidewalk, instructing students to “Step inside,

son”, the second directed one of the small groups of teens to remove their baseball caps. They fixed the guard with the same dead-eyed stare they had offered the candy seller. “Take it off, or get on home”, stated the guard. After a four or five second pause, and a slight, knowing smirk from one, the four boys removed their hats and continued inside.

While not a particularly tense moment, this first encounter with Chilton was unique to my visits at Succeed Again sites. Each of the three sites I had visited prior to my time at the counter-case site was sparsely populated and devoid of grouped students outside of classrooms. Chilton possessed the true vibe of an inner-city high school. And while the encounter with the guard was the first and last act of defiance I would witness while there, I would hear many stories of such behavior from former Chilton staff.

That brief vignette was but one of several differences I found during my time at Chilton, and through my interviews with current and former staff and graduates. Differences were expected: after all, Chilton was selected as a counter-case because data indicated that the site’s performance was in fact different from the three success case sites. Over the five-year period where Benoit, Booker, and Osborne outperformed the program average in graduate creation by over 30 percent, Chilton produced 21 percent fewer graduates than the overall Succeed Again average. It was far from the worst site. Indeed, two sites underperformed by nearly 80 percent, and several others fell short by 40 percent or more. Yet I suspected that what I would find at those sites would be so outside the norm of competent practice that comparing them to the high performing sites would produce little learning. Chilton was a better fit because data indicated the site was somewhat effective, just not as effective as the average, and quite a bit less effective than the high performers I had found.

Chilton did share several characteristics with the high performers. Location and demographics were very similar to those of Benoit and Booker. The site was located in an inner city, high-poverty, low-SES neighborhood with high concentrations of minorities and non-native English speakers that possessed low levels of educational attainment. The median income for Chilton's zip code was 39 percent below the statewide median income, and 27 percent of the residents lived below the poverty level. Foreign-born population totaled 40 percent, and whites accounted for only 4 percent of the population within the zip code, while Latinos made up 59 percent and African Americans accounted for another 31 percent. The feeder high schools for Chilton were among Chaparral Unified's worst, with all three placed within the district's intervention program, and one having been completely dismantled and reconstituted by Chaparral Unified officials in 2014.

Also similar to the three former high performing sites examined in this study, Chilton had undergone the same brutal cuts and had former staff members with experience replaced by staff from outside the program that had never worked within dropout recovery. Julie R., their long-time consultant, was all that remained of the staff from 2008-2013. She had been working at the site since 2000, and had spent an additional 10 years in the program as a teaching assistant, and then a teacher at other sites. Teacher hours had been cut by 33 percent, and consultant hours dropped by 25 percent. Cecilia N. and Bill W., two teachers that had staffed the site from 2008-2013, had moved on to roles at consultants at other sites within Succeed Again. Their cumulative 24 years of experience was gone, and in their place were two teachers who, as of school year 2014-15, totaled 3 years of experience between them. Performance dipped notably. In school year 2013-14, the site totaled 34 graduates, down from a high of 79 in school year 2011-12, a decline of 57 percent.

While there were a number of other similarities between Chilton and the success case sites, it is illuminating to examine the areas in which they differ. And it became apparent throughout the interviews with staff that a great deal of these differences center around the very beliefs and practices that fused the success sites together with a strong bond of commonality. The rest of this counter-case examines the four beliefs, and their related best practices, that emerged from the strong performers and considers them through the lens of Chilton Succeed Again. The words and experiences of the consultant, teachers, and graduates of Chilton Succeed Again make clear that all at the site did not share a number of the four core beliefs shared by the high performers. Often, even when Chilton employees *said* they held a belief common to that of the high performers, the related *practices* that turned belief into action at the three high performers were conspicuously absent.

Graduation and Beyond was Not Quite the Goal at Chilton Succeed Again

While the nine employees of the high performing sites examined in this study unanimously declared graduation as the number one goal at their site, this was not the finding at Chilton Succeed Again. While it is true that each employee spoke of graduation as *a goal* of the program, they did not cite it as *the goal* in the emphatic manner that was displayed at the three high performers. “I think the end goal for me is, look, graduation is just a milestone. Many of our kids won’t go to college. I think the ultimate goal is they become independent”, said former teacher Cecilia N. “What’s important is to be able to give them a foundation so that they’re able to use the tools that we teach them later on in life, and to be able to manage their own lives.” Chilton’s consultant echoed Cecilia’s thoughts about college not being the future environ of their students when she bluntly stated, “Obviously you’re not going to send a Succeed Again student to a four-year university.” And former teacher Bill W. took it further. “Most of those kids won’t

get anywhere at a community college, never mind transfer. They were *lucky* if they could get it together and finish Chilton.”

This lack of belief in the primacy of graduation as a goal and in the ability of their students to attend college and thrive was indicated by a notable *absence of college talk and college action* at the site. While Julie R. stated that she had a relationship with a local community college to provide information sessions to students, neither teacher remembered formal college-going programs from their years at the site. “What I remember is, who we had partnerships with were like the gang prevention people, along those lines. I don’t recall us having colleges come out and speak to the students”, said Cecilia N. No college-going material was present at the site during my visits, and Julie R. had none to present when I asked her if I could see a brochure from her partnership with the local community college. Graduates from the program confirm this finding, with four of five stating they never received any information about college from the site. Three were able to matriculate because they had older siblings or family members that had attended college. The one graduate that reported receiving help with college stated that Julie R. had helped her find an application online. While the *impact* of college talk and college action was weak at the successful sites, its *presence* was undeniable.

Two other key practices related to graduation and beyond being the goal of the program were absent or present in a very diminished state at Chilton. In contrast to the successful sites, Chilton had a disjointed and unevenly applied *regimen for test preparation*. Julie R. stated that her teachers did preparation for the state exit exam, but that they engaged in the practice differently. She could not describe the length or times of the preparation, nor the specific content. “I think that what they do is they use the test booklets that the state releases, and then they help the kids for a few weeks, like once a week.” Cecilia N. stated that while she was there,

she always prepped her students, but became visibly annoyed when recalling that she was alone in this practice. “It was ridiculous. I would be busting my ass to prep these kids, and Bill W. would never do a thing. And no one said a word.” Bill W. disputed this, recalling that he had prepared “worksheets” for students that he would hand out weekly. In contrast to the successful sites, which utilized group settings for all of their test prep, Cecilia N. described her efforts as independent study-based.

A clear difference between Chilton and the success cases was that Chilton *did not establish a baseline* for admittance. Consultant Julie R. was clear that she took students into the program based on her own personal assessment of whether they could be successful, and ignored test scores that may indicate a student might have trouble in an independent study setting.

Whether they assessed at a third grade level, a second grade level, I will give them the time to sit down, meet with me, and discuss where they’re at in terms of their reading level and develop a plan. Our program requires a minimum ninth grade reading level, but I’m not rigid in that regard. What I’ll be looking at is the whole picture. I’ll talk to the student, take a writing sample. There are a lot of variables that go into it. What I look to do if I have a kid that grossly underperforms on the reading test, what I look to do is I will use another tool to measure.

Julie R. was not alone in accepting students with lower than the program-mandated reading level. Caleb I. from Benoit did as well, but stated he stopped the practice after the reading lab that was provided for these students was closed. Julie said they once had a reading lab, but it was “ineffective”. When asked why she sent students to an ineffective remediation setting, she replied, “Look, they had to go somewhere, get some help. That’s what they gave us.” Program data demonstrates that Chilton students possessed a much lower reading level upon entry than those at the successful sites. From 2008-13, students enrolling at Benoit read at an 8.0 level, at Booker an 8.4, and at Osborne, an 8.8. But Chilton’s students tested in with an average reading level of 6.2, meaning a great number of students attending would have fallen

below a sixth grade reading level, and be faced with coursework with a mandated eleventh grade minimum reading level. Chilton was also the only site of the four in this study that did not test the math skills of students upon intake.

Julie R.'s decision to enroll students with very low reading levels was very unpopular with her teachers, who felt it made their jobs more difficult, or even impossible at times. They also felt they were complicit in placing children into an inappropriate learning environment and thereby delaying the real help they may need. "We just became this dumping ground for the high schools", said Bill W. "Every kid they wanted to get rid of because they hadn't done their job ended up here. And we were stuck trying to teach kids who couldn't read *anything*, let alone write. It was ridiculous. Impossible." Cecilia N. spoke bluntly about the impact enrolling students with low math skills and a fourth grade reading level had on her prospects for graduating them, and about her perception of the reading lab that was supposed to help them.

Kids could not even do basic math. And I'm not talking about multiplication or even plain division. There were kids that were testing at a fourth grade level and I would still get them. It was just impossible. When I was at the previous site, a kid that did not know how to read, they never graduated. I never had a kid that was a miracle, was testing at a fourth grade level and they graduated. It *never happened*. They would try to enroll them in a reading class, but those classes were so ineffective that it was a joke. It was a stagnant program. They would just be lingering in that reading program for months and months with nothing being accomplished. I felt guilty. We never should have put those kids in there.

Chilton Succeed Again Was Neither Well Organized, Nor Tightly Structured

Staff at the three high performing sites in this study all felt a key to their success was that they were extraordinarily well organized and their site was characterized by a very tight structure. Consultants described their sites as running "like a clock", and expressed a belief that anyone should be able to walk into a well-run site and find everything they needed to do their job. When asked about organization at Chilton, Julie R. also spoke about organization skills as a key component of a strong consultant. "You need someone that's systematic, someone that's

organized. If you're not organized in Succeed Again, given the volume of paperwork, you have problems." But when asked if she felt she and her site was organized, she responded not with assuredness and a zeal for the virtues of organization, as I had found from the other consultants. "Are we organized? I guess. I mean, there's always room for improvement. Yeah. I would say yeah. We're about, I would say, ninety percent organized. Eighty percent, maybe. Can we improve? Yes. Definitely."

Julie's former teachers certainly felt there was room for improvement. "That site was a mess", stated Cecilia N. "That site was really unorganized. They didn't have any type of organization whatsoever. That site also didn't have any type of graduation plan presented when a kid was enrolled." And Bill W. spoke of the impact disorganization had on performance.

I could never go into her office and find something if I needed it. She was like, "Okay, I'm going to call you in twenty minutes about a student." You never got the call. "Let's meet for an hour at 8:30." You never met because she was too busy. She never set aside time when it was needed, never had a schedule, would always take walk-ins so plans and meetings and schedules were never followed. She never knew where anything was. It was chaotic. It was just chaos.

At the strong performers, four practices grew out of the belief that excellent sites were well organized and tightly structured. Of the four, two were present in belief at Chilton. Staff all stated that involvement of parents as a crucial member of the team was essential, and that action on this front, and others, should occur immediately. However, unlike at two of the strong performers, *there was no formal program or plan targeting parent involvement*. Indeed, Chilton was unique among the sites in this study in that it allowed children to participate in orientation without having a parent present. All three strong performing sites mandated parental attendance at orientation. And Cecilia N. felt that not everyone at the site was following through on contacting parents in a timely manner, or even contacting them at all. She stated that Julie R.'s disorganized nature as a consultant caused a delay in dealing with student issues that required

parental involvement. Additionally, she believed that her co-teacher, Bill W., was extremely negligent in following up with parents. “Oh, god. It was ridiculous,” she stated when asked about the workplace effort put forth by her colleague. “He *never* called parents. And you can put that down on the record. I *never* in all the years I worked with him heard him pick up the phone and call a parent.”

The disagreement in perspectives voiced by staff from Chilton was also unique to this study. The three high performers were very unified in their responses and memories of what had helped them be successful. This discord is interesting when considered with the fact that *Chilton was the one site that did not have any formal team-building process in place through structured meetings*. The level of sharing, of both practices and ideas, that I found at the three high performing sites was notably lower at Chilton, with staff defining themselves as “islands” that worked “in a vacuum”, and viewing the level of collaboration over best practices to be “nonexistent”. The two teachers did not feel there was a high level of teamwork at the sight. All three employees were effusive, however, in praising the “camaraderie” that existed at the site, and consistently cited their warm personal feelings for each other when asked about teamwork. However, none cited specific collaborative efforts that addressed best practices or sharing ideas regarding students.

The fourth practice arising out of the successful sites’ belief that strong sites are well organized and tightly structured was that *every site developed and enforced high standards*. *Staff from Chilton had strong, negative feelings about the absence of this practice at Chilton*. Each teacher stated that structure was notably absent from the site: students were able to do as they wished, consequences for breaking program rules were absent, and the consultant refused to back

them up when they attempted to enforce structure within their own classrooms. Cecilia N. spoke about the impact this had on students and her classroom.

On student culture there, kids knew they could get away with pretty much anything and they wouldn't be dropped...so were disciplinary decisions of teachers ever honored there? No, because they knew they could go to the consultant, give a little sob story. They'd be sent back, and then students knew they could pretty much get away with anything. On staff, people were angry all the time...it was just negative, it was a real negative impact because for myself, I felt like I was not trusted enough. We had no control.

Bill W. concurred. "I hated it. Kids who were total deadbeats would hang around for months, doing nothing, getting others in trouble. Not enforcing rules created, like, an atmosphere of no rules."

Students noted this absence of rules and enforcement as well. Three of the five graduates I interviewed remembered the site having a lax enforcement of structure. Cynthia S. noted the impact this had on her ability to get work done in the classroom, and the way student behavior negatively impacted her view of the classroom environment.

Miss N. would send them to Julie R., and then they would come back, and then they would keep doing it, and you're just like, really man? Like why are you here, we're all here because we have a second chance. These other schools, they don't want to take us in, and we have a second chance here, and you're going to just keep messing it up? I got irritated a couple of times. But they knew. I felt like, look, they *all* felt like, "Well, fuck it. I'm just gonna get a warning, I'm gonna get away with it." You know, I mean, because it was all just basically the same thing, and it was always the same people...I felt like I was in kindergarten at certain points, and I couldn't get shit done.

Some Chilton Staff Felt the Largest Challenge for Kids was Life and Not Themselves, and the Kids Noticed

The view of Chilton staff toward these students and their struggles was, for the most part, empathetic and similar to the understanding that I encountered at the three high performing sites. Consultant Julie R. and teacher Cecilia N. emphatically *expressed their belief that the biggest problem for their students was their lives, social environments, and past poor educational*

opportunities. Just as at other sites, flexibility was employed at Chilton, although, as mentioned above, the site was *too* flexible in many people's eyes. However, Julie R. and Cecilia N. both mentioned tying flexibility to an understanding that students were going to encounter bumps that precluded them from turning in work. This practice matched that of the instructors at high performing sites. They both set up practices, such as individual orientation meetings with scripted, personal questions, that were designed to help them gain knowledge about the student, and to help the student trust them. These two staff were aware that their first encounter with students was a critical moment, and they sought to capitalize on that initial meeting by establishing a personal connection.

Julie R. tied this strategy to salesmanship.

I mean, it's amazing because when I encounter a kid, right from the get-go knowing their name...they look at me kinda odd. I guess it tells you a lot about the schools they came from, but they're like "Wait a minute. You know my name already?" And I'm like, "Yeah, and I know you're coming from this high school, and I know you play the drums, and you're into this type of music." When they see this, they're going to buy what you're selling.

And Cecilia N. stated her view succinctly. "It's about being interested in them as humans rather than as a number in the classroom. And they get that. It's why they come back."

Each of the three Chilton graduates that were students of Cecilia N. spoke positively of the care she expressed and how tight a bond they felt with her. Cynthia S. spoke glowingly of her time with Cecilia. "That was my homie right there. I was talking to my mom about it the other day. I have a lot of love for her. If it wasn't for her, I don't know what the hell coulda happened to me." Three students spoke glowingly of Julie R. and the help she provided in putting them back on track. And these staff members' perceptions of the struggles these students faced were borne out in the interviews with former graduates. Four of the five stated they had struggled with drugs prior to and during their time at Succeed Again. Two of the five engaged in

self-mutilation with razor-blades, and three faced an abusive parent in the home. Three of the five had been forcibly expelled from high school, one of them from three different high schools within her freshman year. Chilton Succeed Again, and its understanding staff, provided these students a home, a surrogate family, and an opportunity to right themselves.

One staff member at Chilton did not share the outlook, or engage in the practices, mentioned above. Bill W. stated his philosophy plainly.

These kids were their own worst enemy. Not one of them could get out of their own damn way. My job was to help them understand that they had to stop blaming other people and start accepting responsibility for their own actions. You don't want to do your work? Find another place. Their lives might have been hard, but everybody's life is hard. There were four hundred kids with hard lives that were graduating high school up the street every year, and these kids wanted us to baby them all the time. We were not helping them by allowing them to wallow in excuses.

Students that worked with Bill W. noticed that his attitude was less welcoming. The two interviewed for this study stated that they were never asked about their personal lives or struggles. Both were the only two program graduates interviewed in this study that stated they had a *negative* first encounter with their teacher. They ascribed their progress in the program to their own willpower and ability. This was a marked contrast to the other three graduates, and the vast majority of those at other sites, who attributed their success to their teachers and consultants. And while both of these students did graduate from high school and one has completed a degree at a four year university, Bill W.'s graduation totals were far exceeded by those of Cecilia N. during the years of data considered for this study. From 2008-12, Cecilia N. produced 60 percent of Chilton's graduates while Bill W. accounted for only 33 percent. The remaining seven percent were students that had been removed from the classroom and graduated with Julie R.

Chilton Did Not Work as Hard Toward Site Improvement

The Chilton site was a clear contrast to the former high performers at Benoit, Booker, and Osborne when it came toward working to site improvement. While each staff member stated that sites should work toward improving themselves, none of the practices that emerged from this belief at the successful sites were present in a majority of the staff at Chilton. *Cecilia N. was alone in improvising and creating outside of the traditional Succeed Again structure.* She had designed several essay writing guidebooks and purchased novels with her own funds so that her students would have materials to read outside the normal scope of the program. Additionally, she had created a large, comprehensive, multi-week test preparation program centered around the state's high school exit exam and the GED test. The materials were entirely original, and took "months" to create. Otherwise, all curricular materials at the site were typical to Succeed Again, and no other improvisational creations were cited in staff or student interviews. Nor were any visible at the site.

Bill W. did speak of an effort to *prioritize time* by hewing to a very specific schedule of when he completed his tasks, but he was alone in mentioning the importance of time management. And the only outside partnership mentioned by staff or students was a gang-prevention effort that had been discontinued after the arrest of the program's founder on gang-related charges. Most specifically, no college related outreach programs were present, and although consultant Julie R. mentioned "relationships" with colleges, no former teacher or graduate remembered coming into contact with colleges or community colleges during their time at Chilton.

Program graduates cited the lack of college partnerships as a clear hindrance in their ability to succeed in college. All five of the site's graduates interviewed in the course of this study cited *a lack of understanding of how to go to college.* Chilton graduates are not alone in

this. The vast majority of Succeed Again graduates interviewed from the high performing sites reported the same finding. The two Chilton graduates with the most success at the postsecondary level, two women, Ursula D. and Naomi D., had siblings that had previously attended college. They stated that they received a good deal of help from their families and those siblings when it came to applying, enrolling, and learning how to pay for college.

More troubling is that Chilton graduates reported less success in college than those from the high performing sites. While the site did boast two recipients of four-year degrees, two students failed to make it past the first semester of their time in college, although both expressed a desire to return in the future. The fifth Chilton grad finished in 2009, yet remained in community college in 2015. Nancy K. described her struggles with math as the main culprit. “I just could not pass the first math classes, and I got stuck, then there was no space. It was a nightmare and I almost quit, but now I only need one more.” Four of the five Chilton graduates indicated that math was their main challenge in school. All four stated that their math skills did not improve during their time at Chilton.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Students in the United States drop out at alarming rates, and despite some limited, recent progress (Editors, 2013), the country's dropout rate has remained relatively unchanged for more than 40 years (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Orfield, 2004; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). This behavior imposes tremendous costs upon both the individual student and society as a whole. Students that leave school without a diploma face limited job prospects, reduced career earnings, a greater chance of incarceration, increased rates of health problems, and are more likely to give birth to children that suffer the same fate (Alexander, 2012; Bailey, 2007; Belfield & Levin, 2007a; Moretti, 2007; Muennig, 2007; Cecilia Elena Rouse, 2007; Rumberger, 2011). And society as a whole faces an economic loss approaching \$50 billion in state and federal taxes alone (Belfield, 2007a; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Cecilia Elena Rouse, 2007; Rumberger, 2011).

Efforts to target and reverse educational underperformance are numerous and varied in design. Most interventions seek to address dropout behavior once students have matriculated to, or already left, high school. Unfortunately, multiple researchers report that dropout prevention and recovery programs that begin during the high school years lack success because they target students too late in their disengagement process from school (Bridges et al., 2008; Dynarski et al., 2008; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Finn, 1989; Rumberger, 2011; Silver et al., 2008). Dynarski and Gleason evaluated 20 recovery programs across the country, following over 10,000 students for two to three years. "The key finding from the evaluation", they write, "is that most programs made almost no difference in preventing dropping out in general."

This study sought to learn how several sites within a larger dropout recovery program that utilized an independent study-based curriculum were bucking both national and program-average levels of success and producing large numbers of graduates over the span of several years. In addition, it sought to assess the impact the program had on graduates' lives and

academic careers once they entered post-secondary education environments. While there were limitations to the study, the data collected indicates that with the proper programmatic design, maintenance, training, staff mindset, and support, such programs can produce great success in the graduate-creation arena, and have a strong positive impact on college-going behavior and success at the post-secondary level.

In my final chapter, I discuss recommendations that come from my research findings. The recommendations are organized around the four major ideas I found that practitioners at strong performing sites all shared: that graduation and beyond was the goal of the program, that strong sites were team-based, well organized, and tightly structured, that the largest challenge for dropouts was their life and prior, poor educational opportunities, and that sites within the program, and the program as a whole, should work towards improvement. I will discuss the practices associated with each of these beliefs, and connect them to the research base while at the same time discussing the impact of such best practices on the post-secondary success of Succeed Again students. Within each of these sections, I discuss the conclusions that I have drawn from my research and the implications that these findings have on the practices of teachers and administrators who strive for success in the dropout recovery arena. I then discuss the implications for practice, offer suggestions for future research, and conclude with a review of the limitations of the study.

Discussion of the Belief that Graduation and Beyond is the Goal

Staff who are successful with dropout recovery share a common belief that the purpose of such programs is to graduate students and help them succeed in college.

The results of this study suggest that staff that graduate large numbers of dropouts from the Succeed Again program share a common belief that the very purpose of the program is to help children achieve graduation and matriculate to and succeed in post-secondary educational

settings. Research indicates that preparing students for the world beyond high school is a key component of successful dropout recovery interventions (Dynarski et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2011). Consultants and teachers from this study that were successful at graduating students and creating success at the post-secondary level kept a constant eye on achieving the goal of graduation, and moving students to the next step in their education. The repetition of such behavior on the part of instructors, and the positive reactions this study found to such actions from program graduates, suggest that helping students to visualize the possibility of success in high school and the need to move on to college is very beneficial.

The emotional toll of low grades and what has often been a multi-year experience of failure is a weight that hampers the academic progress of dropouts (Bridges et al., 2008). High performing Succeed Again staff countered this historical impediment by focusing on the positive: all high performing staff used visual representations of success to remind students and families that the former dropouts were making progress toward the end goal of graduation. In addition to notifying parents when courses were completed, engaging in public displays of progress such as the posting of course completion certificates, and constantly updating grad boards, all three high performing sites utilized the success of past students to motivate current ones. The literature on dropouts suggests that students encounter a great deal of negativity during their years in traditional high schools, and even before (Bridges et al., 2008; Meeker et al., 2009; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Such positive, success-focused actions on the part of staff are an antidote to these experiences. Research also indicates that teachers who hold low expectations concerning their students' potential for success may actually diminish their chances of succeeding (Bridges et al., 2008; Oakes, 2005). Staff at high performing Succeed Again sites

clearly exhibited the opposite behavior, and achieved the opposite results. The setting of high standards and celebration of accomplishments is of clear benefit to the students.

A number of researchers point to the “one-size-fits-all” nature of American public high schools as a potential cause for dropout behavior, and suggest that more be done to ensure that appropriate schools are designed to serve the varied needs of particular students (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Bridges et al., 2008; Dynarski, 2004; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Successful Succeed Again sites adhere to the idea that all schools may not be appropriate for all students. Each of the high performing sites took care to select students for whom independent study would be an appropriate model of learning. They pretested students’ reading levels to ensure they could handle the rigors of coursework. Several instructors voiced the opinion that it was inappropriate to place already struggling students in an educational arena where they would lack the proper skills and support to succeed. The idea of pretesting may strike some as exclusionary. However, instructors cited the lack of pretests, and the low skilled students that were admitted at the Chilton counter case site, as a key reason for student failure. Pretesting students to make sure independent study curricula is an appropriate mode of education may be a key to ensuring the “right-fit” called for in the literature. However, it is important for sites and instructors to maintain flexibility within this structure. All efforts should be taken to ensure that the program is attempting to enroll, rather than exclude students. The program needs to ensure that it fosters the belief that students can often succeed *if* they are given a *chance* to succeed.

Multiple researchers report that high-stakes exit exams can be potent barriers to graduation, particularly to the struggling students that populate dropout recovery programs (Bridges et al., 2008; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The increased accountability ushered in by NCLB is cited as having a strong negative impact on some of the students it was

most intended to help, low-SES students of color, because of the testing requirements (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004). Succeed Again's enrollment was dominated by these students, with the branches located in low-SES neighborhoods and over 90 percent of its students non-white.

To combat this challenge and open the pathway to graduation, high performing Succeed Again sites created unique test-preparation programs designed to assist students with crossing these barriers. The availability of these carefully constructed classes, conducted in group settings, was cited by a large majority of program graduates as a key to their success. More than half of the former graduates interviewed in this study noted that they felt nervous about taking the exams or had failed them in the past. They indicated the classes had a strong positive influence on their ability to pass the two mandated tests required for graduation. And students indicated that the group-setting nature, which contrasted with the independent study-design of the Succeed Again program, helped them to succeed in post-graduate settings. This finding suggests that test-preparation for mandated exams should be a standard practice in the program. In addition, practitioners of independent study-design dropout recovery should examine the potential benefits of hybridizing their program to include traditional, group classes. The findings of this study suggest it is important to re-expose dropouts to the classroom environment they will encounter in the post-secondary arena.

It is highly recommended that the above practices be extended to all sites in the Succeed Again program, and that they be incorporated into all dropout recovery programs.

Unfortunately, one additional strong recommendation is that the Succeed Again program, even the strong performing sites, must do more to ease the transition for their students from the program to college. Despite the presence of partnerships with local post-secondary institutions

and the engagement in college-talk and college-action at the high performing sites, Succeed Again graduates needed to receive more information, sooner, about how to apply to and attend college. With research indicating that the K-12 college pipeline is dysfunctional even within traditional high school settings (Venezia, 2003; Venezia & Kirst, 2005), it is reasonable to assume the pathway is even more clouded for former dropouts graduating from non-traditional settings. While graduates interviewed in this study reported success in the post-secondary arena, a large majority stated they had trouble knowing what to do in order to matriculate. And because this study only examined what happened to graduates who matriculated to post-secondary settings, we know little about those who do not, and why they do not. The program must increase efforts in this area immediately.

Discussion of the Belief that Strong Sites are Team-Based, Well-Organized, Tightly Structured Settings

Sites generating large numbers of graduates viewed themselves as a team, established practices to foster teamwork, and maintained order and structure.

Research concerning America's dropout phenomena often indicates that a frequent contributor to dropout behavior is the high level of dysfunction that is found in some schools (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Dynarski, 2004; Dynarski et al., 2008; Meeker et al., 2009, 2009; Orfield et al., 2004; Rumberger, 2004). That such schools are often located in high-poverty cities and neighborhoods, and often serve large numbers of students of color, contributes to the high probability that a dropout in America will be a low-SES, non-white youth living in the inner-city (Belfield, 2007a; Orfield et al., 2004; Tienda & Alon, 2007).

The high schools attended by students in this study were, sadly, no exception to this rule. A sweeping majority of graduates interviewed for this study reported high levels of dysfunction in their original high schools, and tied their level of disengagement with education to such

dysfunction. In an acknowledgement of dropouts' prior experiences, staff at successful Succeed Again sites sought to counteract these negative experiences by creating welcoming, nurturing environments that fostered student success. The second belief shared by successful staff, that strong sites were team-based, well-organized and tightly structured, became a counterweight to the inappropriate educational environments many Succeed Again students had faced.

To put this belief into action, staff established a practice at all three sites of scheduled, organized weekly meetings. The intent of these meetings was not only to share information, but also, more importantly, to learn from each staff member's experiences and practices. A large majority of teachers and consultants cited the team atmosphere created by these meetings as a key to their success. With research indicating that small learning communities and team-based structures can yield large impacts on student and adult learning (Sammon, 2007; Whitford & Wood, 2010), the warm response of teachers to the meetings suggests that they were encountering a level of adult learning that made their jobs more fruitful. The absence of these meetings at the counter case site, and the diminished performance levels, suggests this practice should be imported to all sites.

Parent outreach and involvement is a clear best practice that emerges from the literature covering dropout recovery (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Bridges et al., 2008; Dynarski, 2004; Dynarski et al., 2008; Meeker et al., 2009; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Romo and Falbo (2001), assembled a compendium of practices for parents to follow in order to assist their children in achieving high school graduation: the parent is in charge, parents assert authority in a manner respectful of the child, parents set limits, they monitor students, parents draw the line with peers, they repeat a continuous message to "stay in school", and they are involved with the school.

Almost every researcher examining dropout recovery suggests parent involvement as a best practice.

It is clear that all three of the successful sites in this study made strong efforts to engage parents. Such engagement was immediate, consistent, and contact was made for both positive and negative student actions. Two of the three high performing sites had actually designed programs designed to teach skills similar to Romo and Falbo's above list. Graduates interviewed for this study often indicated they felt "lost" or "ignored" in their traditional high school environment, and said their parents frequently did not know how they were doing in school. That was different at the high performing Succeed Again sites. With several interviewees remarking on the immediacy of feedback their families received regarding academic transgressions, and the amount of pride they and their families felt when being contacted regarding progress in the program, it is strongly recommended that formal parent outreach procedures be codified and implemented at all Succeed Again sites.

While research cautions against enforcing overly strict, zero-tolerance rules (Losen, 2012; Orfield et al., 2004; Wald & Losen, 2003), a final practice related to the second belief, that of maintaining high standards and enforcing structure, is supported in the literature (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Bridges et al., 2008; Dynarski, 2004; Dynarski et al., 2008; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Maintenance of standards and enforcement of structure was present at the three high performing sites, and absent at the lower performing counter case. Enforcement of structure earned high praise not only from teachers, from whom it is to be expected, but also from program graduates. A majority of graduates remarked that their original high schools lacked structure and that rules were openly flaunted. Some stated this behavior deterred them from succeeding in class, as the learning environment became chaotic. Others felt that the lack of rule

enforcement, the permissive atmosphere, and lack of adult supervision allowed for them to misbehave and get into trouble. The support for maintaining high standards and enforcing structure in the literature, its presence at all the high performing sites, the embrace of the practice by both students and staff, as well as its absence from the counter case site makes it an important one for all dropout recovery sites.

Discussion of the Belief that the Largest Challenge for Students Is Life and Poor Prior Educational Opportunities, not Themselves

High performing Succeed Again staff believed that all students could succeed, and that their largest challenges were environmental, rather than a lack of personal skills.

While all four, core beliefs shared by staff at high performing sites led to increased performance, perhaps the most important was the third belief, that students' largest challenges came from their lives, and not themselves. This realization caused teachers and consultants to act in a manner that allowed students to feel cared for and kept them in the program at times when a lack of flexibility may have caused a student to be expelled. The understanding nature of these high performing staff created sites where students were seen as people rather than as cogs in an educational machine. Because staff believed that students were not wholly responsible for their prior academic underperformance, they were able to have hope for the student's ability to progress, rekindle that hope within the student, be aware of when these life challenges may be impeding progress within the program, and work towards providing the students with a high quality of personalized education that they may not have received in the past.

This belief that dropouts are impacted more by their environments and prior poor educational opportunities than by an innate lack of skill is strongly supported in the literature. When causes of the dropout phenomena are examined (Dynarski et al., 2008; Finn, 1989; Losen, 2012; Orfield et al., 2004; Rumberger, 2011; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), researchers conclude that

low skills may sometimes be a part of the dropout equation. However, such skills are seldom the only cause, and are themselves the result of low-quality educational opportunities, less-than adequate family support, residence in a low-income community, and many other additional factors (Rumberger, 2011).

Armed with this belief, high performing staff made strong, conscious efforts to let students know that they cared about their welfare and their educational progress. This personal effort is consistent with the findings of Tyler and Lofstrom (2009), who found that successful dropout recovery programs have close mentoring of students, case management of individual students, and attention to out of school problems that can affect behavior, attendance, and performance. Because these characteristics were present at high performing Succeed Again sites, students understood that staff cared about them, and it positively impacted their performance. Nearly every single graduate interviewed for this study remarked about the care they felt at their site, and most contrasted this experience with the prior negative feelings they had about high school. Negative stories about the environment of traditional high schools had a noticeable impact upon staff at high performing Succeed Again sites, and caused them to be mindful of where their students were coming from. Seven of the nine staff at the high performing sites stated that they asked students to describe their prior educational experiences during their initial orientation, so they could be aware of how receptive the student would be to certain strategies. High performing staff saw students' prior negative experiences as unfortunate, but seized upon them as a teaching tool and a way to get to know students better. These tactics, their prevalence at the successful sites and their success demonstrates they should be put into a teacher's toolbox at all dropout recovery sites.

Flexibility and the ability for students to work at their own pace is another best practice found not only in the literature (Belfield & Levin, 2007a; Martin & Halperin, 2006; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), but also at all three of the high performing Succeed Again sites. A large majority of graduates interviewed remarked that flexibility was a key component of their success at Succeed Again. It is important to note that flexibility came in differing modes. At times a student would be allowed to take a week, or several, off from the program if life or work got too hectic. Others mentioned that staff gave them a break at times when their parents should have been notified due to a particular transgression. Some students noted that they had been allowed to complete different, more enriching assignments for credit in lieu of work mandated by the curriculum. Several mentioned their instructors allowed them to replace novels for an English class. Many graduates spoke glowingly of the program's lack of required seat time as fitting in better with their need to work or care for children or help their families. And others contrasted the freedom they felt with being able to schedule their own time with what Osborne's Derek N. called "the unending monotony" of traditional high school. The findings of this study indicate that while overall program structure and rules should be upheld, staff that wish to create high performance in the dropout recovery arena must allow for both curricular and rule-related flexibility. Staff should always seek to ascertain the reason why students are not performing, before enacting discipline.

The final practice related to the third belief, that of selecting staff with appropriate skill levels, has backing from the literature. A key characteristic of successful recovery programs, according to the literature, is the employment of "appropriate" staff (Belfield & Levin, 2007a; Bridges et al., 2008; Martin & Halperin, 2006; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). All three high performing sites believed that staff should be educated in all subject areas, and proficient enough

to teach whatever assignment was called for. Staff made personal efforts to improve their knowledge at the high performing sites if they felt unskilled. High performing staff members were acutely aware that others in the program might not be as prepared as they were. Several frequently cited the educational unpreparedness of staff from other sites as a reason for the program's overall underperformance. It is important to note that the drive to improve as a teacher was absent at the Chilton counter case site, and no formal program for teacher education or skill improvement exists in the Succeed Again program. It is highly suggested from the findings of this study that one be put in place, and believed that such a program would have noticeable impacts on the educational attainment levels of the program's students.

Discussion of the Belief that Staff Should Work Hard to Improve Their Own Sites, and that the Program Should Follow Suit

Strong performing staff sought constant site-based improvement by improvising, forging outside partnerships, prioritizing time as a resource, and avoiding negative practices they saw in others.

With underperformance being the norm in the Succeed Again program, it was heartening, although not unexpected, to learn that the high performing sites worked constantly to improve their performance. Each successful practitioner interviewed for this study spoke of wanting to make his or her site a better place where more learning could occur. Many of them used the terminology, as did Benoit's Caleb I, of "love". "I fell in love with the program and I wanted to constantly improve it and then kept improving it for fifteen years."

In order to engender increased site performance, these successful staff members worked hard at improvising solutions and creating innovations, particularly in the areas of curriculum, which would improve student's chances of success. Dynarski and Gleason (2002) note that many alternative schools have had trouble engaging their students despite the creation of small classes and personalized settings. Successful Succeed Again staff overcame this challenge by

using improvisation to create two strong practices called for in the literature, curricular options (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Bridges et al., 2008) and focusing on improvement in math and English skills (Martin & Halperin, 2006; Rumberger, 2011). By engineering completely unique test-prep programs that assisted students in passing the math and English exit exams, and by designing teacher-directed classroom settings and allowing for options within the standard curricula, high performing instructors outpaced the performance of normal Succeed Again employees and helped their students on the path to graduation. The presence of this characteristic at all three success sites has profound implications for the program. It suggests that efforts should be made to hire motivated staff, and to put in place a system of rewards, or otherwise establish a culture that keeps sites and staff looking to improve. The impact of this behavior on student learning is an important finding.

Many researchers have indicated that partnering with outside agencies and community groups can have tremendous impacts on student achievement and general life improvement both within the dropout recovery sphere (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Dynarski et al., 2008; Dynarski & Gleason, 2002) and in the traditional educational arena (Bathgate, Colvin, & Silva, 2011). High performing Succeed Again sites exhibited this behavior in creating partnerships with local organizations providing a host of services. The impact of some of these partnerships, according to graduate interviews, was weak. However, the fact that they exist at all, when absent from much of the program, demonstrates the drive these high performers had toward creating the best site they could provide for students, and their belief that community engagement was a key to student success.

Two practices within this finding are largely absent from the literature on dropouts. The practice of prioritizing time as a valuable resource, and avoiding the negative practices exhibited

by others in the program do not appear in the traditional literature surrounding dropout recovery programs. A reason for this could be that this program, at the time of the study, had just been through a relentless gutting of its budget. As hours were cut, staff at high performing sites learned they had to do the same, but with less time. They also witnessed a large amount of what they considered “unprofessional” behavior from colleagues. High performing staff were very vocal about the lack of effort and skill they observed in others throughout the program, particularly as they saw their own hours cut in the same manner as low performers. This widespread and vocal condemnation of low performing staff by those who had demonstrated success was a clear red warning flag for the program. It was in danger of losing its best staff due to alienation and frustration. Indeed, some successful staff had already left the program, and productivity had declined immensely. These findings indicate the cuts, and the way in which they were carried out, have had profound impacts on the program. Those impacts should be immediately evaluated in order to examine whether there is a different direction the program might take in the future when budgets shrink.

Implications for Practice

The results of this study illuminate numerous areas of concern for the Succeed Again program. It became clear from both the interviews with staff and my experience gathering data and viewing the sites that the Succeed Again program was existing in a severely diminished state than it was a mere three years prior. Budget cuts had wreaked havoc on the program, and once highly successful sites were performing as poorly as the lowest performers in the program had three years prior. Benoit produced, in 2013-14, fewer than 20 percent of the total graduates they generated during their years of peak performance. Of particular concern was the exodus of staff. The disappearance of experienced staff made gathering data for this study challenging, and has

clearly impacted the success of the sites, the program, and its students. The loss of institutional knowledge was severe.

Fortunately, findings from this study point a way forward for the program, and suggest that it can rebuild itself. The primary step for Succeed Again should be to *stabilize* the program. This can be accomplished by closing a number of the 26 sites so that the program budget can be utilized to restore the remaining sites to their prior capacity. Teachers and consultants unanimously stated that they now struggle greatly to perform their work given the severe cuts to their hours. Hours should be restored to high performers in the program so they can begin to generate their past high performance. Any future cuts to the program must be made in a manner consistent with the data, and no longer in an across-the-board manner. Across-the-board cuts have made weak sites weaker, strong sites weaker, and have ill-served the students who so desperately need the services of Succeed Again. Multiple years of program data must be analyzed to better learn which instructors and consultants should be retained, while those with demonstrated histories of low performance in dropout recovery should be moved into different positions within Chaparral Unified. There is a great deal of data indicating student needs are not being met at many program sites. The district needs to act upon that data and recommit to fully staffed, smartly staffed sites.

A second priority for Succeed Again is to *formalize* the program to ensure that sites no longer function as independent fiefdoms but instead operate in a cohesive manner in which the sites across the program can share practices and learn from one another. Program leaders and stakeholders need to *devise a program mission* that is agreed to by all interested parties. Not one person interviewed for this study could accurately identify what the stated mission of the Succeed Again program was. The lack of a common purpose creates drift across the

organization, and the resulting entropy makes large-scale reform excessively difficult. Consistent with the findings of this study, the program's mission should be centered on the goal of graduation and beyond for all students. *Training of staff based on the best practices identified in this study* should occur immediately at regularly scheduled, well-planned professional development events. Each of the successful practices identified in this study should be established at all Succeed Again sites, and staff should be trained to implement and maintain them. And strong program leadership needs to be identified and hired so that these reforms are carried out with the firm hand necessary to make them succeed. The amount of distrust expressed by Succeed Again staff toward program leadership is highly detrimental to the organization and the students it is tasked with serving.

The program needs to *revitalize* itself by selecting new staff in a manner consistent with the findings of this study. Particular attention should be paid to the finding that all of the best practices utilized by successful instructors are rooted in four core beliefs. Program leadership must work to identify educators that share these four beliefs, or to instill these beliefs in staff through exposing them to literature concerning dropout recovery and successful practices. It is of interest that while only one successful staff member interviewed for this study had knowledge of dropout theory and literature, *all* of them were utilizing practices recommended in the literature, and were doing so in order to actualize their *beliefs* about their practice and their students. It is important for the program to understand that the *mindset* of their instructors is a key toward making them successful. It is likely that successful staff shared these beliefs due to their long years of experience with this particular sub-group of students. New staff should be selected and trained based upon this mindset, and the entire program should explore connections between belief and practice frequently.

Finally, the program needs to *codify, formalize, and strengthen* its relationship with local post-secondary institutions. Relationships with these institutions, while present at high performing sites, was the only best practice that was having a limited impact, according to the data gathered from student interviews. Formal partnerships need to be established program-wide. Assistance with applications, financial-aid, and general college knowledge should be provided by professionals with a college counseling background, and families should be involved in the process. Just because these students *don't know how* to go to college does not mean that they *should not go*. And just because these students were dropouts does not absolve Chaparral Unified of its duty to provide appropriate levels of college assistance to them. The levels of persistence indicated in this study demonstrate that this particular program is preparing its graduates to succeed in college, and a stronger link between the program and colleges will no doubt lead to greater success.

This study proved that when sites are run well, adequately funded, and appropriately staffed, the Succeed Again model of a reduced-credit pathway to a high school diploma is exceedingly valuable. Just because many sites within the program were not strong performers did not mean that they could not become one. This study shows that there is a roadmap of best practices to follow for site and program improvement. If care is taken in the restructuring of the program, forethought is given to the steps needed to put reforms suggested by this study into place, and most importantly, strong leaders are put in place to carry out these reforms, Succeed Again can not only rebound from what this study found to be a precipitous fall, but also exceed the level of performance it exhibited at its zenith.

While Succeed Again is only one program, the levels of success once found at the high performing sites should cause additional agencies and programs that deal with struggling

students to take note of both the practices of the high performing sites, and the success of the reduced-credit pathway in both returning students to school and preparing them for college. The findings of this study are applicable to various agencies that attempt to provide education to youth outside of traditional school structures. The practices of high performing instructors are applicable at alternative schools, environments where low performance has historically been an issue. Probation agencies, juvenile camps, and the prisons that house large numbers of dropouts need to carefully examine their own educational models to see if a reduced-credit pathway can jumpstart their educational programs and provide brighter futures for the people they are tasked with rehabilitating. The fact that Succeed Again significantly altered the *belief* that students had *in the importance of education* is powerful and important, and should be the type of mindset change that criminal justice systems attempt to inspire through their educational offerings. Community agencies that partner with troubled youth, such as gang-prevention programs and drug rehabilitation programs should also consider the best practices in this study when they evaluate their own educational offerings. If Succeed Again could turn troubled youths into successful college students, other agencies can, and must, as well.

Areas for Future Research

The findings of this study indicate multiple potential areas for future research. The primary finding that successful instructional practices are all firmly rooted in four core beliefs suggests that attention should be paid toward examining the impact of mindset on practitioners of dropout recovery. It is clear that these instructors were profoundly influenced by their beliefs, and that these beliefs created action. Future study could examine a program where these beliefs are not in existence, and examining the impact upon performance once staff are trained in the

importance of these beliefs. Additional studies could also seek to identify high performers in other dropout recovery programs and examine whether those instructors share these beliefs.

A second potential area for future study concerns the population of students from Succeed Again that were not examined in this study, non-graduates and graduates that did not matriculate to post-secondary institutions. The voice of these students is missing from this study, and its inclusion would paint a more complete picture of Succeed Again's impact. A qualitative study that examines the experiences of these students, seeking to understand their lack of performance or satisfaction with the program, or to better understand why they select options other than college, would help the program to better understand its areas of strengths and weaknesses.

One final important area for future study concerns the impact of reduced-credit pathways to high school diplomas and then to college. The performance of these once highly disengaged students in Succeed Again was the focus and concern of this study's second research question. Their success in college suggests that alternative pathways to high school graduation and beyond are in fact highly viable educational options, and that districts that struggle with dropout behavior should provide these options. According to the graduates interviewed for this study, without the opportunity afforded them by the reduced-credit pathway, they likely would have remained dropouts, subject to the many ills and struggles that afflict that population of Americans, and imposing a tremendous cost upon society as a whole. Future studies should seek out and examine programs similar to Succeed Again, or design, implement, and study them. The findings of this study, and the students who provided data, suggest that alternative pathways to graduation, when properly implemented by skilled professionals, have a tremendous potential to alter lives of disenfranchised students for the better.

Limitations of the Study

While efforts were made to ensure the trustworthiness of this study, some limitations do exist. One concerns the coding system employed to generate the findings. Timing and financial constraints did not allow for additional coding to be conducted by multiple researchers. While the researcher has extensive experience in and knowledge regarding dropout recovery practices, the addition of multiple coders would strengthen the reliability of the coding scheme. A comparison check of responses would strengthen reliability.

An additional limitation concerns the type of program considered in the study. Succeed Again is part of an approach to dropout recovery programs referred to a “systemic” reform (Rumberger, 2011), where changes to the nature of school systems themselves, such as reduced or altered requirements for graduation, are employed. The particular, reduced-credit program design employed by the program examined in this study is very unique in American high schools. Responses may not be representative of the entire spectrum of dropout recovery programs and practitioners across the country. Therefore, the generalizability of this study can be viewed as somewhat limited. Further research is recommended to learn if the findings in this study are generalizable across the field of dropout recovery. However, the correlation of a great number of the findings to what has already been reflected in the literature suggests that the findings are valid.

An additional limitation concerns the study’s design. Time constraints limited the design to one that considered the experiences of program graduates that matriculated to college, in order to assess the role of the program in affecting achievement at the post-secondary level. Yet a voice missing from the study is that of students who graduated from the program yet did *not* choose to pursue further education. Learning how and why those students made that choice, and assessing whether the program played a role in that decision, would provide important additional

information that would further illuminate the role the program plays in the college-going rates, habits, and success of program graduates. It would also help the program better define and understand the needs of this unique population with regards to college-going, and allow for them to strengthen their college-going program, already a notable weakness of the program. While the absence of these students from the study is unfortunate, it does not undermine the validity of the findings concerning those who did matriculate to post-secondary educational settings.

A final limitation concerns selection method. While many precautions were taken to ensure that selection of participants was unbiased, potential candidates were allowed to refuse to participate in the study. A small number of suitable candidates from the graduate pool refused to be included in this study. It would be interesting to learn why, and whether those that did agree to participate did so because they were more inclined to view the program favorably. While a number of graduates, particularly those from the counter case site did express negative views towards aspects of the program and its personnel, the self-selection process of participants raises the question whether more of these feelings may have been expressed from a truly random sampling.

APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR HIGH PERFORMING SITES

Consultant Protocol

Can you tell me about how you came to work as an Outreach Consultant in the Succeed Again Program?

How many years have you been working as an Outreach Consultant in Succeed Again and have you spent your entire teaching career working in dropout recovery?

Did you complete a formal undergraduate or graduate teacher preparation program?

Can you describe the type of training you were given when you began working in Succeed Again? Please try to be specific about who delivered the training, the length of time spent on the training and the skills that were covered.

IF NEEDED: Can you describe the type of training you were given when you began working as an Outreach Consultant in Succeed Again? Please try to be specific about who delivered the training, the length of time spent on the training and the skills that were covered.

Can you describe the type of professional development training you receive yearly through the Succeed Again Program?

Can you talk a bit about how effective you find Succeed Again's professional development for Outreach Consultants?

You have demonstrated very strong performance in graduating and retaining students, especially when compared to the rest of the program. Can you talk a bit about why you think you might be performing at such a high level?

Are there specific instructional practices you can identify that you believe lead to your high graduation and retention rates?

What specific things do you do as an Outreach Consultant to keep the students focused on graduation?

There is considerable research indicating that educators who make a personal connection with students are particularly effective with dropout recovery. Do you strive to establish these connections with students, and how do you do that if you do?

Can you describe the connection you have with your students' families? How often are you in contact with them, for what reasons, and do you find contacting parents to be helpful?

Can you describe your enrollment process for me? How do you locate students and do you target specific types of students or those with particular skill levels? What is your procedure for enrolling them?

How does your site determine which newly enrolled student gets assigned to which teacher?

Can you describe a typical day in your workplace for me? How many students do you work with, and what are the main tasks you must accomplish?

Do you have a set weekly plan for how you approach the school week with your students in terms of due dates for work and other practices? Can you describe a typical week?

How many classes do your students work on at the same time, and how many assignments do you feel they should complete?

Do you feel as if some students should be allowed to complete less work than others, and why do you feel as you do?

What do you do when students do not complete their work?

Can you describe the process for dropping a student from the program, and whether you find it to function smoothly at your site? What causes you to put this process into motion?

Are there drawbacks for the site as a whole when you keep students enrolled who are not completing work or adhering to program rules? If so, what are they?

How do you work with students who are quite often entering the program at varying skill levels?

Are there things you do to try to help your teachers achieve success across the varying skill levels, and do you think about this issue when enrolling students?

What are some of the things that go awry during your day or week and how do you deal with them?

Can you talk about the need for teachers to teach multiple subject areas? Are there particular challenges you can identify with this process?

What are the subjects most challenging for independent study-based instruction, and how does your individual site deal with these challenges?

Do you have a formal process in place for CAHSEE Preparation? If so, can you describe it to me?

Can you describe some of the challenges you face in this job, and how you work toward overcoming them?

What skillsets do you think make for a good teacher in the Succeed Again Program?

What skillsets do you think makes for a good Outreach Consultant in the Succeed Again Program?

What skills might people working in Succeed Again need that more traditional teachers do not?

In your experience, does the Succeed Again Program provide training to teach these skills to employees, or do they ensure that they choose personnel who already have those skills?

Students who drop out of school are often disenchanted with the educational process. Part of the challenge for dropout recovery programs is convincing returning students that education is important. Do you find this to be true, and do you use practices that address this need?

Your program has gone through a large number of cuts in recent years. Do you have any thoughts about how the cuts have been carried out and the impact they may have had on your practice, your performance and your students?

Are there particular types of students that you think might be more readily suited to the independent study-based recovery model? Can you describe these students?

What do you find the largest challenges facing your students to be? Would you describe them as academic, life related, from other areas, or a combination of these, and how does your site address these problems?

What can you tell me about your working relationship with your site's teachers?

Tell me about the level of collaboration between the teachers and outreach consultant at your site. Do you feel you are highly collaborative or could you be more so, and do you feel that collaboration has any positive or negative consequences?

How often do you have formal meetings as an entire staff, and what do you discuss? In addition, do you feel the frequency of these meetings should be increased or decreased?

Do you find these meetings productive, or could they be improved? If so, how?

How often does the Succeed Again Program as a whole have formal meetings, and what is discussed? To your mind, are these meetings productive?

Do you work with your students at all on college access issues? Do you push them to enroll and talk to them about college?

At what point in the Succeed Again process do you begin speaking to students about college?

Does your site have any formal practices regarding college for students? For example, do you have any partnerships with local colleges? Do you think these programs are or could be beneficial for your students, and do you know how to access them?

Does the Succeed Again Program have any formal focus on college-going and college assistance in place for students? Can you describe them and do you know how to access them?

Have you ever worked at any other Succeed Again sites? If so, in what ways were your experiences similar and in what ways were they different?

Have you ever worked in a more traditional, teacher-directed, non-independent study setting?

Can you describe the difference to me?

How much knowledge about formal theory and research surrounding dropout recovery do you have? Do you think you could benefit from more knowledge of this, and why do you feel the way you do?

Are you aware that there is a large body of research surrounding dropouts, and does the Succeed Again Program do anything to provide you with this research?

How do you use data to inform your practices? If you consider data, what types do you look at, what do you consider important, and why?

Do you ever measure your site's performance against the performance of other sites or the program as a whole? How do you do this, and what do you consider to be important performance indicators?

Do you think that the Succeed Again Program should have an increased focus upon data, and why do you feel the way you do? What might be the benefits and drawbacks of an increased use of data.

What might be the impediments to increasing the use of data in the Succeed Again Program?

Can you talk a bit about information flow in the program? To your mind, is there ample flow of information from program leaders to Outreach Consultants to teachers?

What is your role in the process of information flow, and how do you accomplish it?

Do you feel the information flow process could be improved, and what might be some important benefits? What are some concrete examples of information you would like to know more about, and how might that information improve your performance?

Can you talk a bit about the Succeed Again Program's focus on performance? Do you feel that the program stresses the importance of strong performance, or could they do more?

Can you talk a bit about the GED + 50 pathway to a high school diploma? To your mind, what are its strengths and weaknesses? Do you think it is strong enough to prepare students for success at the post-secondary level?

How important is graduation for you as an end goal with your students? Do you consider it the most important outcome for the program, or are there other things that take precedence for you?

What do you think is the Succeed Again Program's mission?

Are you familiar with the Succeed Again Program's formal mission statement, and if so, what does it include?

Do you feel as if the mission is clearly articulated to all throughout the program, and do you feel like there is universal buy-in to the mission from all 26 sites? Please give specific examples for why you feel as you do.

Can you talk a bit about the Succeed Again Program's potential for improvement? Do you feel the program can improve, and in which ways?

Can you address whether or not you feel the program has a concrete plan in place for program improvement, and cite examples for why you feel as you do?

FOLLOW UP: Do you feel such a plan would be useful, and in what ways? In addition, how should this plan be assembled, and what would make it effective?

How would you describe the level of agreement amongst the various sites' Outreach Consultants?

How would you describe the level of collaboration across sites? Do you feel the program could benefit from more or less collaboration, and what might the benefits or drawbacks be?

What do you view as the impediments to overall program improvement for Succeed Again?
How might they be overcome?

What is your overall view of leadership in the Succeed Again Program? Who are the leaders?
What do you feel leaders should do, and do you feel as though program leaders are
accomplishing what they should be accomplishing?

What do you find most satisfying about working in this position, and why?

What is the most frustrating thing about working in Succeed Again, and why do you find it so?

It is often very challenging working with these particular types of students. Behavioral issues
and stories of their lives can often weigh on staff members. Do you ever find that this happens to
you, and how do you try to mitigate the impact of working with such a challenging population of
students?

Can you tell me a story about a particular success you have had with a student and how it made
you feel?

Can you tell me a story about a situation where you could have done more to help a particular
student?

Why do you do what you do?

Teacher Protocol

Can you tell me about how you came to work as an instructor in the Succeed Again Program?

How many years have you been teaching in Succeed Again and have you spent your entire teaching career working in dropout recovery?

Did you complete a formal undergraduate or graduate teacher preparation program?

Can you describe the type of training you were given when you began teaching in Succeed Again? Please try to be specific about who delivered the training, the length of time spent on the training and the skills that were covered.

Can you describe the type of professional development training you receive yearly through the Succeed Again Program?

Can you talk a bit about how effective you find Succeed Again's professional development for teachers?

You have demonstrated very strong performance in graduating and retaining students, especially when compared to the rest of the program. Can you talk a bit about why you think you might be performing at such a high level?

Are there specific instructional practices you can identify that you believe lead to your high graduation and retention rates?

What specific things do you do as a teacher to keep the students focused on graduation?

There is considerable research indicating that teachers who make a personal connection with students are particularly effective with dropout recovery. Do you strive to establish these connections with students, and how do you do that if you do?

Can you describe the connection you have with your students' families? How often are you in contact with them, for what reasons, and do you find contacting parents to be helpful?

Do you have an individual teacher to student orientation? Do you cover personal expectations at this time?

What do you think is important about the first contact meeting with the student, and do you utilize this meeting to get a read on kids?

How does your site determine which newly enrolled student gets assigned to which teacher?

Can you describe a typical day in your workplace for me? How many students do you work with, what are the subjects you are focusing on, etc.?

Do you have a set weekly plan for how you approach the school week with your students in terms of due dates for work and other practices? Can you describe a typical week?

How many classes do your students work on at the same time, and how many assignments do you feel they should complete?

Do you differentiate your instruction based upon individual students?

Do you feel as if some students should be allowed to complete less work than others, and why do you feel as you do?

What do you do when students do not complete their work?

Can you describe the process for dropping a student from the program, and whether you find it to function smoothly at your site? What causes you to put this process into motion?

Are there drawbacks for the site as a whole when you keep students enrolled who are not completing work or adhering to program rules? If so, what are they?

How do you work with students who are quite often entering the program at varying skill levels?

Are there instructional practices you use in order to achieve success across the varying skill levels?

What are some of the things that go awry during your day or week and how do you deal with them?

Can you tell me about the experience of teaching multiple subject areas? Are there some you feel more proficient with than others, or are there particular challenges you can identify with this process?

What are the subjects most challenging for independent study-based instruction, and how does your individual site deal with these challenges?

Do you have a formal process in place for CAHSEE Preparation? If so, can you describe it to me?

What skillsets do you think make for a good teacher in the Succeed Again Program?

What skillsets do you think makes for a good Outreach Consultant in the Succeed Again Program?

What skills might people working in Succeed Again need that more traditional teachers do not?

In your experience, does the Succeed Again Program provide training to teach these skills to employees, or do they ensure that they choose personnel who already have those skills?

Students who drop out of school are often disenchanted with the educational process. Part of the challenge for dropout recovery programs is convincing returning students that education is important. Do you find this to be true, and do you use practices that address this need?

Are there particular types of students that you think might be more readily suited to the independent study-based recovery model? Can you describe these students?

What do you find the largest challenges facing your students to be? Would you describe them as academic, life related, from other areas, or a combination of these, and how does your site address these problems?

What can you tell me about your working relationship with your site outreach consultant?

Tell me about the level of collaboration between the teachers and outreach consultant at your site. Do you feel you are highly collaborative or could you be more so, and do you feel that collaboration has any positive or negative consequences?

How often do you have formal meetings as an entire staff, and what do you discuss? In addition, do you feel the frequency of these meetings should be increased or decreased?

Do you find these meetings productive, or could they be improved? If so, how?

How often does the Succeed Again Program as a whole have formal meetings, and what is discussed? To your mind, are these meetings productive?

Your program has gone through a large number of cuts in recent years. Do you have any thoughts about how the cuts have been carried out and the impact they may have had on your practice, your performance and your students?

Do you work with your students at all on college access issues? Do you push them to enroll and talk to them about college?

Does your site have any formal practices regarding college for students? For example, do you have any partnerships with local colleges? Do you think these programs are or could be beneficial for your students?

Does the Succeed Again Program have any formal focus on college-going and college assistance in place for students? Can you describe them and do you know how to access them?

Have you ever worked at any other Succeed Again sites? If so, in what ways were your experiences similar and in what ways were they different?

Have you ever worked in a more traditional, teacher-directed, non-independent study setting? Can you describe the difference to me?

How much knowledge about formal theory and research surrounding dropout recovery do you have? Do you think you could benefit from more knowledge of this, and why do you feel the way you do?

Are you aware that there is a large body of research surrounding dropouts, and does the Succeed Again Program do anything to provide you with this research?

How do you use data to inform your practices? If you consider data, what types do you look at, what do you consider important, and why?

Do you ever measure your site's performance against the performance of other sites or the program as a whole? How do you do this, and what do you consider to be important performance indicators?

Do you think that the Succeed Again Program should have an increased focus upon data, and why do you feel the way you do? What might be the benefits and drawbacks of an increased use of data.

What might be the impediments to increasing the use of data in the Succeed Again Program?

Can you talk a bit about information flow in the program? To your mind, is there ample flow of information from program leaders to Outreach Consultants to teachers?

What is your role in the process of information flow, and how do you accomplish it?

Do you feel the information flow process could be improved, and what might be some important benefits? What are some concrete examples of information you would like to know more about, and how might that information improve your performance?

Can you talk a bit about the Succeed Again Program's focus on performance? Do you feel that the program stresses the importance of strong performance, or could they do more?

Can you talk a bit about the GED + 50 pathway to a high school diploma? To your mind, what are its strengths and weaknesses? Do you think it is strong enough to prepare students for success at the post-secondary level?

How important is graduation for you as an end goal with your students? Do you consider it the most important outcome for the program, or are there other things that take precedence for you?

What do you think is the Succeed Again Program's mission?

Are you familiar with the Succeed Again Program's formal mission statement, and if so, what does it include?

Do you feel as if the mission is clearly articulated to all throughout the program, and do you feel like there is universal buy-in to the mission from all 26 sites? Please give specific examples for why you feel as you do.

Can you talk a bit about the Succeed Again Program's potential for improvement? Do you feel the program can improve, and in which ways?

Can you address whether or not you feel the program has a concrete plan in place for program improvement, and cite examples for why you feel as you do?

FOLLOW UP: Do you feel such a plan would be useful, and in what ways? In addition, how should this plan be assembled, and what would make it effective?

How would you describe the level of agreement amongst the various sites' staff members?

How would you describe the level of collaboration across sites? Do you feel the program could benefit from more or less collaboration, and what might the benefits or drawbacks be?

What do you view as the impediments to overall program improvement for Succeed Again?

How might they be overcome?

What is your overall view of leadership in the Succeed Again Program? Who are the leaders?

What do you feel leaders should do, and do you feel as though program leaders are accomplishing what they should be accomplishing?

What do you find most satisfying about working in this position, and why?

What is the most frustrating thing about working in Succeed Again, and why do you find it so?

It is often very challenging working with these particular types of students. Behavioral issues and stories of their homelives can often weigh on teachers. Do you ever find that this happens to you, and how do you try to mitigate the impact of working with such a challenging population of students?

Can you tell me a story about a particular success you have had with a student and how it made you feel?

Can you tell me a story about a situation where you could have done more to help a particular student?

Why do you do what you do?

Do you feel that you identify with these kids?

Graduate Protocol

What can you tell me about how you ended up in Succeed Again?

Can you give me some specific reasons why you think you were failing to achieve in high school?

When you came to Succeed Again, was it different? How so?

Do you feel these differences allowed for you to make better academic progress? If so, why?

What do you think helped you the MOST during your time here, and why that particular thing?

Can you tell me a bit about what you've been up to since you graduated?

Have you taken any college classes?

Are you completing those classes and what have your grades been like?

What was the experience of a college classroom like for you?

Did you feel academically prepared when you started those classes?

Can you tell me a story about something you struggled with academically in college classes?

How about a story about something you feel you did well in your college class?

Can you talk a bit about the difference between your experiences in college, in high school and here in Succeed Again?

Can you think of any similarities between the different levels? What can you tell me about them?

What do you think we could do differently in Succeed Again to better prepare you for college?

I want to talk a bit about your process of applying and enrolling in college. Do you feel like you knew what to do to go to college?

Do you feel you received good information about going to college while you were here in Succeed Again? Can you give me some examples of that information?

How do you think we might do this better? What type of information would you like to receive? What do you feel would be useful?

Can you talk a bit about whether you have formed a personal connection with your teacher, and how that connection has impacted you?

APPENDIX B: INTERVIEW PROTOCOLS FOR LOW PERFORMING SITES

Low Performing Consultant Protocol

Can you tell me about how you came to work as an Outreach Consultant in the Succeed Again Program?

How many years have you been working as an Outreach Consultant in Succeed Again and have you spent your entire teaching career working in dropout recovery?

Did you complete a formal undergraduate or graduate teacher preparation program?

Can you describe the type of training you were given when you began working in Succeed Again? Please try to be specific about who delivered the training, the length of time spent on the training and the skills that were covered.

IF NEEDED: Can you describe the type of training you were given when you began working as an Outreach Consultant in Succeed Again? Please try to be specific about who delivered the training, the length of time spent on the training and the skills that were covered.

Can you describe the type of professional development training you receive yearly through the Succeed Again Program?

Can you talk a bit about how effective you find Succeed Again's professional development for Outreach Consultants?

Do you feel that graduation is the ultimate measure of success in Succeed Again, or do you think there are other measures of student success that deserve more attention?

Are there specific instructional practices you can identify that you believe lead to graduation?

What specific things do you do as an Outreach Consultant to keep the students focused on graduation?

There is considerable research indicating that educators who make a personal connection with students are particularly effective with dropout recovery. Do you strive to establish these connections with students, and how do you do that if you do?

Can you describe the connection you have with your students' families? How often are you in contact with them, for what reasons, and do you find contacting parents to be helpful?

Can you describe your enrollment process for me? How do you locate students and do you target specific types of students or those with particular skill levels? What is your procedure for enrolling them?

How does your site determine which newly enrolled student gets assigned to which teacher?

Can you describe a typical day in your workplace for me? How many students do you work with, and what are the main tasks you must accomplish?

Do you have a set weekly plan for how you approach the school week with your students in terms of due dates for work and other practices? Can you describe a typical week?

How many classes do your students work on at the same time, and how many assignments do you feel they should complete?

Do you feel as if some students should be allowed to complete less work than others, and why do you feel as you do?

What do you do when students do not complete their work?

Can you describe the process for dropping a student from the program, and whether you find it to function smoothly at your site? What causes you to put this process into motion?

Are there drawbacks for the site as a whole when you keep students enrolled who are not completing work or adhering to program rules? If so, what are they?

How do you work with students who are quite often entering the program at varying skill levels?

Are there things you do to try to help your teachers achieve success across the varying skill levels, and do you think about this issue when enrolling students?

What are some of the things that go awry during your day or week and how do you deal with them?

Can you talk about the need for teachers to teach multiple subject areas? Are there particular challenges you can identify with this process?

What are the subjects most challenging for independent study-based instruction, and how does your individual site deal with these challenges?

Do you have a formal process in place for CAHSEE Preparation? If so, can you describe it to me?

Can you describe some of the challenges you face in this job, and how you work toward overcoming them?

What skillsets do you think make for a good teacher in the Succeed Again Program?

What skillsets do you think makes for a good Outreach Consultant in the Succeed Again Program?

What skills might people working in Succeed Again need that more traditional teachers do not?

In your experience, does the Succeed Again Program provide training to teach these skills to employees, or do they ensure that they choose personnel who already have those skills?

Students who drop out of school are often disenchanted with the educational process. Part of the challenge for dropout recovery programs is convincing returning students that education is important. Do you find this to be true, and do you use practices that address this need?

Your program has gone through a large number of cuts in recent years. Do you have any thoughts about how the cuts have been carried out and the impact they may have had on your practice, your performance and your students?

Are there particular types of students that you think might be more readily suited to the independent study-based recovery model? Can you describe these students?

What do you find the largest challenges facing your students to be? Would you describe them as academic, life related, from other areas, or a combination of these, and how does your site address these problems?

What can you tell me about your working relationship with your site's teachers?

Tell me about the level of collaboration between the teachers and outreach consultant at your site. Do you feel you are highly collaborative or could you be more so, and do you feel that collaboration has any positive or negative consequences?

How often do you have formal meetings as an entire staff, and what do you discuss? In addition, do you feel the frequency of these meetings should be increased or decreased?

Do you find these meetings productive, or could they be improved? If so, how?

How often does the Succeed Again Program as a whole have formal meetings, and what is discussed? To your mind, are these meetings productive?

Do you work with your students at all on college access issues? Do you push them to enroll and talk to them about college?

At what point in the Succeed Again process do you begin speaking to students about college?

Does your site have any formal practices regarding college for students? For example, do you have any partnerships with local colleges? Do you think these programs are or could be beneficial for your students, and do you know how to access them?

Does the Succeed Again Program have any formal focus on college-going and college assistance in place for students? Can you describe them and do you know how to access them?

Have you ever worked at any other Succeed Again sites? If so, in what ways were your experiences similar and in what ways were they different?

Have you ever worked in a more traditional, teacher-directed, non-independent study setting?

Can you describe the difference to me?

How much knowledge about formal theory and research surrounding dropout recovery do you have? Do you think you could benefit from more knowledge of this, and why do you feel the way you do?

Are you aware that there is a large body of research surrounding dropouts, and does the Succeed Again Program do anything to provide you with this research?

How do you use data to inform your practices? If you consider data, what types do you look at, what do you consider important, and why?

Do you ever measure your site's performance against the performance of other sites or the program as a whole? How do you do this, and what do you consider to be important performance indicators?

Do you think that the Succeed Again Program should have an increased focus upon data, and why do you feel the way you do? What might be the benefits and drawbacks of an increased use of data.

What might be the impediments to increasing the use of data in the Succeed Again Program?

Can you talk a bit about information flow in the program? To your mind, is there ample flow of information from program leaders to Outreach Consultants to teachers?

What is your role in the process of information flow, and how do you accomplish it?

Do you feel the information flow process could be improved, and what might be some important benefits? What are some concrete examples of information you would like to know more about, and how might that information improve your performance?

Can you talk a bit about the Succeed Again Program's focus on performance? Do you feel that the program stresses the importance of strong performance, or could they do more?

Can you talk a bit about the GED + 50 pathway to a high school diploma? To your mind, what are its strengths and weaknesses? Do you think it is strong enough to prepare students for success at the post-secondary level?

What do you think is the Succeed Again Program's mission?

Are you familiar with the Succeed Again Program's formal mission statement, and if so, what does it include?

Do you feel as if the mission is clearly articulated to all throughout the program, and do you feel like there is universal buy-in to the mission from all 26 sites? Please give specific examples for why you feel as you do.

Can you talk a bit about the Succeed Again Program's potential for improvement? Do you feel the program can improve, and in which ways?

Can you address whether or not you feel the program has a concrete plan in place for program improvement, and cite examples for why you feel as you do?

FOLLOW UP: Do you feel such a plan would be useful, and in what ways? In addition, how should this plan be assembled, and what would make it effective?

How would you describe the level of agreement amongst the various sites' Outreach Consultants?

How would you describe the level of collaboration across sites? Do you feel the program could benefit from more or less collaboration, and what might the benefits or drawbacks be?

What do you view as the impediments to overall program improvement for Succeed Again? How might they be overcome?

What is your overall view of leadership in the Succeed Again Program? Who are the leaders?

What do you feel leaders should do, and do you feel as though program leaders are accomplishing what they should be accomplishing?

What do you find most satisfying about working in this position, and why?

What is the most frustrating thing about working in Succeed Again, and why do you find it so?

It is often very challenging working with these particular types of students. Behavioral issues and stories of their lives can often weigh on staff members. Do you ever find that this happens to you, and how do you try to mitigate the impact of working with such a challenging population of students?

Can you tell me a story about a particular success you have had with a student and how it made you feel?

Can you tell me a story about a situation where you could have done more to help a particular student?

Why do you do what you do?

Low Performing Teacher Protocol

Can you tell me about how you came to work as an instructor in the Succeed Again Program?

How many years have you been teaching in Succeed Again and have you spent your entire teaching career working in dropout recovery?

Did you complete a formal undergraduate or graduate teacher preparation program?

Can you describe the type of training you were given when you began teaching in Succeed Again? Please try to be specific about who delivered the training, the length of time spent on the training and the skills that were covered.

Can you describe the type of professional development training you receive yearly through the Succeed Again Program?

Can you talk a bit about how effective you find Succeed Again professional development for teachers?

Do you feel that graduation is the ultimate measure of success in Succeed Again, or do you think there are other measures of student success that deserve more attention?

Are there specific instructional practices you can identify that you believe lead to graduation?

What specific things do you do as a teacher to keep the students focused on graduation?

There is considerable research indicating that teachers who make a personal connection with students are particularly effective with dropout recovery. Do you strive to establish these connections with students, and how do you do that if you do?

Can you describe the connection you have with your students' families? How often are you in contact with them, for what reasons, and do you find contacting parents to be helpful?

Can you describe your site's enrollment process for me? How do you locate students and do you target specific types of students or those with particular skill levels? What is your procedure for enrolling them?

How does your site determine which newly enrolled student gets assigned to which teacher?

Can you describe a typical day in your workplace for me? How many students do you work with, what are the subjects you are focusing on, etc.?

Do you have a set weekly plan for how you approach the school week with your students in terms of due dates for work and other practices? Can you describe a typical week?

How many classes do your students work on at the same time, and how many assignments do you feel they should complete?

Do you feel as if some students should be allowed to complete less work than others, and why do you feel as you do?

What do you do when students do not complete their work?

Can you describe the process for dropping a student from the program, and whether you find it to function smoothly at your site? What causes you to put this process into motion?

Are there drawbacks for the site as a whole when you keep students enrolled who are not completing work or adhering to program rules? If so, what are they?

How do you work with students who are quite often entering the program at varying skill levels? Are there instructional practices you use in order to achieve success across the varying skill levels?

What are some of the things that go awry during your day or week and how do you deal with them?

Can you tell me about the experience of teaching multiple subject areas? Are there some you feel more proficient with than others, or are there particular challenges you can identify with this process?

What are the subjects most challenging for independent study-based instruction, and how does your individual site deal with these challenges?

Do you have a formal process in place for CAHSEE Preparation? If so, can you describe it to me?

Can you describe some of the challenges you face in this job, and how you work toward overcoming them?

What skillsets do you think make for a good teacher in the Succeed Again Program?

What skillsets do you think makes for a good Outreach Consultant in the Succeed Again Program?

What skills might people working in Succeed Again need that more traditional teachers do not?

In your experience, does the Succeed Again Program provide training to teach these skills to employees, or do they ensure that they choose personnel who already have those skills?

Students who drop out of school are often disenchanted with the educational process. Part of the challenge for dropout recovery programs is convincing returning students that education is important. Do you find this to be true, and do you use practices that address this need?

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Can you talk a bit about the GED + 50 pathway to a high school diploma? To your mind, what are its strengths and weaknesses? Do you think it is strong enough to prepare students for success at the post-secondary level?

How important is graduation for you as an end goal with your students? Do you consider it the most important outcome for the program, or are there other things that take precedence for you?

What do you think is the Succeed Again Program's mission?

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Can you tell me a story about a situation where you could have done more to help a particular student?

Why do you do what you do?

APPENDIX C: CODING MAP

STAFF		GRADUATES	
Category	Subcategory	Category	Subcategory
Things They Do	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make personal connections • Train staff • Connect with parents • Prioritize graduation • Grad planning • Enforce structure • Utilize data • Allow for flexibility • Test prep • College talk • Relationships with college • Orientations 	Reasons for Dropout	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Family • Schools • Low skills • Drugs • Financial • Peers • Negative teachers • Crime • Gangs • Lack of care
Things They Want	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Program planning • Merit system • Professional development • Dropout theory knowledge • Control over hiring • Time • Increased data usage 	Family Issues	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Single parent • Financial • Jail • Lack of support • Low educational attainment • Dropout of siblings • Low-SES neighborhood • Death
Site-Based Innovations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Test prep programs • Outside partnerships • Staff training • Team building • Data innovations • Student reward system • Outside fundraising 	Effect of Succeed Again	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Changed view of education • Skill improvement • Psychological • Change in friends • Family relationships • College thoughts
Program-Level Thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Leadership • Budget cuts • Future of program • Mission • Collaboration • Adult culture • What to do with struggling sites? 	Succeed Again and College	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program impact • Math • English • Counseling • Pathway to college • Staff messaging • Financial aid
Student-Related Thoughts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Chances of success • Causes of dropout • Academic struggles • Life struggles • Personal connection • Talk about life • Traditional high schools 	College Success	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grades • Math • English • Awards • Achievements • Counseling • Financial • Graduate • Transfer • Dropout

APPENDIX D: READING PRE-TEST SCORES

Average Site Reading Level Pre-Test		
Site		Score
1	Andrews	7.9
2	Armstrong	6.7
3	Benoit	8.0
4	Booker	8.4
5	Chilton	6.2
6	Dupree	6.8
7	Eaglin	6.4
8	Ford	8.2
9	Henry	9.0
10	John	8.0
11	Kaydoe	7.6
12	King	8.0
13	Lewis	6.0
14	Neville	6.1
15	Osborne	8.8
16	Palmer	6.0
17	Parker	7.2
18	Porter	7.0
19	Price	9.2
20	Richard	7.6
21	Ruffin	8.4
22	Smith	8.0
23	Washington	6.6
24	Williams	8.4
25	Williamson	8.2
26	Young	6.9

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