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Pepperdine University
Graduate School of Education and Psychology

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS: KEY STRATEGIES TO INCREASE HIGH SCHOOL
GRADUATION RATES

A dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Organizational Leadership

by

Shannon Dick

April, 2013

Laura Hyatt, Ed.D. – Dissertation Chairperson

This dissertation, written by

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under the guidance of a Faculty Committee and approved by its members, has been submitted to and accepted by the Graduate Faculty in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

DOCTOR OF EDUCATION

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to my amazing husband and best friend, Justin, my closest girlfriend and confidant, Damineh, my family, and the countless number of friends who were always interested in my progress and encouraged me along the way. Most important, I would like to dedicate this body of work to my Heavenly Father who gave me the strength, wisdom, and perseverance that I needed to complete this dissertation.

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ABSTRACT

An alarmingly number of students drop out of high school every day; however, the need for a high school diploma has become increasingly more important for the U.S. to remain globally competitive. Minority students and students living in poverty are disproportionately affected by this issue dropping out at significantly higher rates.

Throughout the years, a number of reform efforts have been targeted at the federal, state, and local levels to address this issue. Some of these efforts have shown promising results.

In an *Education Week* report (Diplomas Count, 2010), 21 urban school districts were identified as districts that are defying expectations based on factors such as district size and poverty level. These districts graduate students at significantly higher rates than districts with similar characteristics. The purpose of this study was to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that exceeded expected graduation rates. A qualitative approach that included interviewing leaders from each of the districts was utilized to understand the strategies employed. A review and synthesis of the research literature provided the constructs for the conceptual framework used to develop the research and interview questions. Content analysis was performed to identify primary themes across the interviews.

The data collected and analyzed revealed 19 primary themes or strategies: (a) close supervision, (b) alternative pathways, (c) fostering a sense of belonging, (d) safety prevention programs, (e) curriculum aligned K-12, (f) using technology to improve results, (g) early identification and support of at-risk students, (h) shared accountability, (i) focus on individual student progress, (j) rigorous curriculum, (k) leadership

development, (l) collaboration and sharing of best practices, (m) common assessments, (n) data-driven instruction, (o) focused collaboration, (p) professional learning communities, (q) connecting parents to school, (r) strong collaboration between school and community, and (s) transparency. Specific examples of how these strategies are being implemented to improve graduation rates are provided. Implications for education leaders, community partners, parents, and policymakers are also discussed.

Chapter 1: Introduction

According to the U.S. Department of Education (2008), each year, one in four students does not complete high school on time or earn a diploma. America's Promise Alliance (2010) states:

Young people who drop out are twice as likely as graduates to be unemployed; three times as likely to live in poverty; eight times more likely to wind up in prison; and twice as likely to become the parent of a child who drops out of school. (para. 16)

Minority students are disproportionately affected, dropping out at significantly higher rates than their White counterparts. For example, in the class of 2007, the graduation rate for Black and Hispanic students was approximately 20% lower than their White peers (Diplomas Count, 2010).

Researchers from Johns Hopkins University (Balfanz & Legters, 2004) conducted a comprehensive study to identify high schools that have significantly higher dropout rates. This research uncovered that only 15% of high schools account for half of all dropouts in the United States. Balfanz and Legters (2004) stated, in these schools, labeled "dropout factories" (p. 5) by the researchers, 60% or fewer students that start their freshman year are enrolled 4 years later. In 2002, a total of 2,007 schools were identified as dropout factories and in 2008 this number decreased to 1,646 (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Moore, & Fox, 2010). In the Western region of the United States, a total of 313 schools were identified as dropout factories, making it one of the regions with the highest number of schools with this designation, second only to the South. Furthermore, the West was the only region that showed an overall increase in the number of dropout factories from 2002

to 2008. Of the states in this region, California accounted for a majority of these schools, with 79 in 2002 and 108 in 2008.

Ample research has been conducted to identify the risk factors associated with students dropping out of school. Primarily, these factors can be organized into three broad categories: (a) student factors (i.e., academic achievement, absenteeism, behavioral problems), (b) social factors (i.e., poverty and lower levels of parental involvement), and (c) school factors (i.e., school organization and school climate; Hess & Copeland, 2001). A large number of states, districts, and schools are implementing a myriad of strategies to address these factors. Many schools and districts are showing promising results despite the presence of environmental factors linked to low graduation rates, such as poverty and large district size. In a 2010 *Education Week* report, the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center identified 21 urban school districts that are defying graduation rate expectations based on their size, student to teacher ratios, racial/ethnic diversity, socioeconomic breakdown, and spending patterns (Diplomas Count, 2010; Swanson, 2010). According to the EPE Research Center, these school districts are posting graduation rates at least 10 percentage points, some close to 20%, higher than what is expected for schools with similar characteristics. Of the 21 urban school districts, five from California were examined in this study (Diplomas Count, 2010).

Organization of the Chapter

This chapter introduces the high school dropout issue, including relevant statistics, risk factors associated with students dropping out, and interventions being implemented at the state, district, and school level. In addition, study details including the research questions, study significance, and the conceptual framework are discussed.

Background and Statement of the Problem

A total of 1.3 million students do not graduate on time annually; approximately 13 million students each decade (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). Minority students are disproportionately affected, dropping out at significantly higher rates than their White counterparts (Diplomas Count, 2010). Students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are also 7 times more likely to drop out of school (Zvoch, 2006).

Ample research has been conducted to understand the factors that contribute to a student's decision to drop out of school. Studies show that students who eventually drop out of school experience a slow and steady process of disengagement (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; MacIver, 2011; Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007) and often demonstrate warning signs as early as kindergarten (Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig, & Heinrich, 2008). Risk factors correlated with high school dropout include student factors such as poor academic performance, high absenteeism, and behavioral problems; social factors such as lower socioeconomic status and minimal parental engagement; and school factors such as school size, organization, composition, and school climate (Hess & Copeland, 2001).

The need to decrease significantly the number of students dropping out of school is at the epicenter of discussions as policymakers, educators, and researchers work together to ensure students are college and career-ready. States and school districts are implementing a number of strategies focused at increasing graduation rates such as developing statewide data tracking systems, developing early warning systems, enhancing professional development of teachers, developing parent engagement strategies, focusing on feeder middle schools, and targeting interventions at key transition years (Balfanz et al., 2010). Policymakers, educators, community leaders, and nonprofit

organizations are working together to identify the factors contributing to the development of schools with low graduation rates, as well as strategies that could be successful in addressing this issue. In 2010, research by Civic Enterprises, Everyone Graduates Center at Johns Hopkins University, and America's Promise Alliance showed that some states are making progress by implementing reform efforts that are focused on community collaboration, strong leadership, evidence-based teaching practices, and innovation (Balfanz et al., 2010). Balfanz et al. (2010) state:

Progress in states and school districts has often been the result of rising to a standard of excellence—with clear goals and expectations from the state to the classroom, by challenging all students with a more rigorous curriculum to obtain a meaningful diploma that prepares them for college and work, and through a targeted approach sustained over time that provides extra supports to the school leaders, teachers and students who need them the most. (p. 6)

State and school district initiatives to increase graduation rates have varied from macro-level changes at the policy and district level to training at the individual teacher level. For example, some states have enacted laws to encourage students to stay in school. Since 2002, 12 states have raised the age students are permitted to dropout from 16 years old to 17 or 18 years old. In Tennessee and West Virginia, students must remain in school until they are 18 in order to keep their driver's license. Other school districts and states have focused efforts at the school level by changing the school climate to center on success and the expectation that all students will graduate college and be career ready. In many states, this includes adopting common core standards in order to standardize learning expectations across districts and states (Balfanz et al., 2010).

Other initiatives that schools have enacted to address high school dropout include developing more robust data systems to track graduation rates and individual students over time, creating early warning and intervention systems to target efficiently students who are at risk of dropping out, focusing on teacher effectiveness, and developing parent engagement strategies. Some of these initiatives are well under way in many states. For example, Virginia, a recipient of a \$17.5 million grant from the Department of Education, is using longitudinal tracking systems to provide teachers with information about incoming students so they can customize lesson plans, electronically send transcripts between schools, and identify characteristics of students who are succeeding in college and the workforce (Balfanz et al., 2010).

Another area that is important to mention and research has consistently supported is the quality of teachers in the classroom and the significant impact this has on student outcomes. In fact, Balfanz et al. (2010) state, “Studies have found that teacher effectiveness has a greater impact on student achievement than any other reform under a school’s control” (p. 11). However, the ability of school districts to attract and retain effective teachers in low performing schools, most often characterized by lower standardized test scores and lower graduation rates, is difficult. School districts are using a variety of strategies including incentives, or what is sometimes referred to as combat pay (Kain, Rivkin, & Hanushek, 2004) to attract teachers to high-needs schools. However, the effectiveness of this approach is still unclear. Studies show that teachers are likely to leave low performing schools for a variety of factors unrelated to salary, including the characteristics of the students, working conditions (i.e., class size, discipline programs, student achievement, principal support), fewer resources in the classroom, and

lack of parent engagement (Greenlee & Brown, 2009; Kain et al., 2004). As a result, combat pay would need to be substantial in order to reduce the impact of these additional factors. In a study in 2004, the salary boost needed was estimated to be 25% to 43%, an amount that is unlikely to be possible with increasingly reduced budgets (Kain et al., 2004). However, the need to staff high-needs schools with effective teachers and to provide teachers with training and support is still critical. To address this issue, many states are incorporating peer coaching, professional learning communities, and formal teacher assessments into practice (Balfanz et al., 2010).

Balfanz et al. (2010) stated, “while significant progress has been made to increase the graduation rate, more than 2 million students in 2008 still attended a high school where graduation was no better than close to a 50/50 proposition” (p. 9). This issue is particularly a problem in states such as California, which are showing little improvement in increasing overall graduation rates or in reducing the number of schools that receive the “dropout factory” designation because 60% or fewer of their freshmen students are enrolled 4 years later (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). To address this issue, researchers and educators should continue to explore effective and scalable models, particularly among schools that are successful at increasing their graduation rates despite the presence of school or social factors that have been known to impede progress.

Purpose of the Study

Although there are numerous studies on risk factors for dropout and the impact this issue has on individuals and society, more research is needed to identify district-specific strategies that have been shown to increase high school graduation rates, particularly among school districts with environmental factors that have been shown to

negatively influence graduation rates. In an *Education Week* report called *Diplomas Count*, 21 urban school districts were identified as school districts that are defying expectations based on their size, student to teacher ratios, racial/ethnic diversity, socioeconomic breakdown, and spending patterns (Diplomas Count, 2010). According to the EPE Research Center, these school districts are demonstrating graduation rates at significantly higher rates than expected. Of these 21 urban school districts, five in California were examined. The purpose of this study was to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that were exceeding expected graduation rates. Notably, these districts are defying expectations in a state that is consistently producing a high number of dropouts in the United States. Understanding the strategies that are contributing to their success could identify strategies that could be replicated in other districts. A list of these districts along with their corresponding graduation rates is provided in Table 1.

Table 1

Five Urban Districts in California That Are Defying Expectations

District	Graduation Rate Actual (Class of 2007)	Graduation Rate Expected (2007)	Expectations Index (Actual Minus Expected)
Visalia Unified (Visalia, CA)	74%	56%	+18
Madera Unified (Madera, CA)	66%	51%	+15
Hemet Unified (Hemet, CA)	65%	52%	+13
Riverside Unified (Riverside, CA)	67%	55%	+12
Long Beach Unified (Long Beach, CA)	61%	50%	+11

Note. Adapted from “Diplomas Count,” by EPE Research Center, 2010, *Education Week*, 29, p. 26. Copyright 2010 by Editorial Projects in Education Inc. Reprinted and adapted with permission from Editorial Projects in Education.

Recent Statistics

In 2007, the graduation rate, or number of students who graduate within 4 years, was estimated to be 68.8%. This rate varied significantly by state, gender, school population size, and race/ethnicity. For example, the state-by-state graduation rate ranged from a high of 83.3% in New Jersey, to a low of 41.8% in Nevada. The graduation rate also varied by population—districts serving cities with populations greater than 250,000 had an average graduation rate of 55% for the class of 2007, districts serving cities with populations between 100,000 to 250,000 had an average graduation rate of 63% for the same year, districts serving small cities with small populations of less than 100,000 had an average graduation rate of 68%, and districts serving rural areas had an average graduation rate of 72%. There was also a variation in graduation rates by gender, with males graduating at lower rates (66%) than females (72.9%). Additionally, graduation rates differed significantly across subgroups of students. The following graduation rates were calculated for the class of 2007 by subgroup: American Indian (50.7%), Asian (80.7%), Hispanic (55.5%), Black (53.7%), and White (76.6%; Diplomas Count, 2010).

Another factor linked to graduation rates across the nation is the location of the high school that students attend. Balfanz, Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, and Fox (2009) identified 17 states that account for approximately 70% of the nation's dropout—Alabama, Arizona, California, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Michigan, Mississippi, Nevada, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Texas. The low-graduation high schools in these states tend to have high enrollments, large student-teacher ratios, high concentrations of students living in poverty, and a large percentage of minority students (Balfanz et al., 2009).

In California, it is estimated that only two thirds of students graduate on time each year. In 2011, approximately 139,400 students failed to graduate high school from CA (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2011). Graduation rates in CA for students who are African American (56%) and Hispanic (59%) are significantly lower than their White (84%) or Asian (87%) peers (Diplomas Count, 2011). Students who are English learners also disproportionately represent students who fail to graduate, representing 30% of the total. Furthermore, students who drop out tend to be concentrated in a subset of schools that represents approximately 4% of the high schools, yet account for 40% of the dropouts in California (California Dropout Research Project, 2008).

Conceptual Framework and Design of the Study

The purpose of this study was to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that are exceeding expected graduation rates (Diplomas Count, 2010). This study employed qualitative research to explore key strategies contributing to the success of these districts. A series of in-depth interviews were conducted with at least one leader in each of the five school districts. For the purposes of this study, a leader was defined as the superintendent, assistant superintendent, board member, or district-level instructional leader. Superintendents, assistant superintendents, and board members are public officials appointed or elected to their position in the school district.

In order to focus the research on the most relevant issues, a review of the literature was conducted to identify key priorities of high performing schools. Based on this review, six strategies emerged as similar attributes of high performing schools. These priorities include providing students with a safe and supportive learning environment

(Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), developing a culture of high expectations for all students (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), ensuring effective leadership at all levels (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), strong collaboration between teachers and administrators (Daggett, 2005; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), and high levels of parent and community support and engagement (Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). These priorities served as the conceptual framework for the current study and helped guide the research and interview questions.

Research Questions

In order to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates, five school districts that are exceeding expected graduation rates were examined. The following research questions were explored:

1. What are the key strategies for providing a safe and supportive learning environment?
2. What are the key strategies for developing a culture of high expectations for all students?
3. What are the key strategies for ensuring effective leadership at all levels?
4. What are the key strategies for data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance?
5. What are the key strategies for ensuring strong collaboration between teachers and administrators?

6. What are the key strategies for maintaining high levels of parent and community support and engagement?

Significance of the Topic

While recommendations have been made by researchers and education policy experts on how states, districts, and schools can reduce the number of students who dropout and increase graduation rates, little empirical evidence is available regarding what is actually working, particularly in schools with a greater risk of having low graduation rates. In order to understand these key strategies, school districts that are successfully addressing this issue despite the influence of environmental factors that have been shown to affect negatively high school graduation, such as poverty and large urban centers, should be studied. The purpose of this study was to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that are exceeding expected graduation rates (Diplomas Count, 2010). According to the EPE Research Center, these urban school districts are exceeding expected graduation rates based on their district size, poverty level, socioeconomic and racial composition, teacher to student ratios, and spending patterns (Swanson, 2010). Understanding the key strategies that are contributing to their success could potentially identify strategies that could be replicated in other schools and districts with similar student demographics and resources. These key strategies may also inform reform efforts in other states, districts, and schools.

Operational Definitions

For the purposes of the study, the following definitions were used:

Academies: The forerunner to the high school that offered a set of basic curriculum in addition to college preparatory programs and teacher preparatory classes for men and women (Ornstein, Levine, & Gutek, 2011).

Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP): A requirement that states receiving federal funding under the No Child Left Behind Act must show improvement from year to year on statewide standardized tests or steps will be taken to improve the schools (Education Week, 2011).

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act: Federal policy that provided incentives for state and local education policymakers to address low-performing high schools and increase federal accountability for raising graduation rates (Almeida, Balfanz, & Steinberg, 2009).

Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate: An estimate of how many high school freshmen will graduate in exactly 4 years within the same school or jurisdiction, not taking into account student migration (Phelps, 2009).

Cohort dropout rate: The percentage of students who dropout from the beginning of ninth grade through the end of 12th grade (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006).

Collaboration: In general, collaboration refers to the ability of individuals to work together toward a common goal or vision. In this paper, it is most often used in the context of collaboration between teachers and administrators in regard to sharing information about student performance and support. It also refers to the ability of teachers and administrations to establish common goals and expectations.

Common schools: The forerunner to today's elementary schools, these schools, available in the 17th and 18th centuries, provided a free and basic education to the common people (Sass, 2011).

Common core standards: A state-led effort to develop common standards that will define the knowledge and skills students must have in their K-12 education experience. The development of these standards has been coordinated by the National Governor's Association Center for Best Practices and the Council of Chief State School Officers. To date, there are common cores standards in Mathematics and English/Language Arts. As of November 2011, all but six states have adopted the standards (Common Core State Standards Initiative, 2011).

Confederation Congress: The governing body prior to the ratification of the U.S. Constitution (Sass, 2011).

Cumulative Promotion Index: Diplomas Count (2010) states:

A method used to calculate high school graduation rates. This method views high school graduation as a process that encompasses four steps: three grade-to-grade promotions (9 to 10, 10 to 11, and 11 to 12) and earning a diploma (grade 12 to graduation). Each of these individual components corresponds to a grade-promotion ratio. Multiplying these four grade-specific promotion ratios together produces the graduation rate. Only students receiving a standard high school diploma are considered graduates. (p. 30)

Current Population Survey: This survey is a monthly survey of households that is conducted by the Bureau of Census for the Bureau of Labor Statistics. This information is

utilized to calculate many statistics related to graduation and dropout (Bureau of Labor Statistics, n.d.).

Data-driven decision making: using data for school and classroom improvement.

Messelt (2004) states data-driven decision making is:

Collecting appropriate data, analyzing that data in a meaningful fashion, getting the data into the hands of the people who need it, and using the data to increase school efficiencies and improve student achievement, and communicating data-driven decisions to key stakeholders. (p. 1)

Dropout: Typically defined as students who leave school (not including transfers) before they graduate from high school with a regular diploma (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006).

Dropout factory: Schools with a promoting power of 60% or less for at least 3 consecutive years (Balfanz & Legters, 2004).

Elementary and Secondary Education Act: Federal legislation enacted in 1965 that provided equal access to education, established high standards, and established a number of programs for disadvantaged youth (Department of Education, 2011).

Event dropout rate: The percentage of high school students who will drop out of school without earning a diploma or alternative credential between the beginning of one school year to the beginning of the next (National Center for Education Statistics [NCES], 2010).

General Education Development (GED): A credential offered through the American Council on Education that is widely seen as a high school equivalency credential. This credential was originally created to support World War II veterans who

did not finish school because they joined the armed forces. The scope of this test has widely expanded throughout the years and is available in all 50 states for individuals who are at least 16 years of age, are not enrolled in high school, have not graduated high school, and meet state requirements for age, residency, and length of time since leaving school (American Council on Education, 2010).

High performing schools: For the purposes of this study a high performing school is defined as a school that consistently graduates students to be college and career-ready. These schools demonstrate high graduation rates; high standardized test results, especially in mathematics and reading; and a culture with high expectations for all students (Center for Public Education, 2007).

Leadership: Northouse (2010) stated leadership is “a process whereby an individual influences a group of individuals to achieve a common goal” (p. 3).

Massachusetts Law: Law passed in 1647, which required towns of at least 50 families to hire schoolmasters to teach the children in the town to read and write, and required towns of 100 or more families to open a Latin grammar school to prepare students for college (Sass, 2011).

National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES): The federal entity for collecting and analyzing data related to education (NCES, 2010).

National Defense Education Act: The first comprehensive education policy enacted in 1958 spurred by the desire to compete more effectively with the Soviet Union (Department of Education, 2011).

A Nation At Risk: A controversial report released by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) that alerted the public to the deteriorating conditions of the public education system.

No Child Left Behind (NCLB): The NCLB legislation, signed into law in January 2002, required states to develop assessments in basic skills to be given to all students in certain grades in order to receive federal funding for schools. Schools receiving Title 1 funding were also required to demonstrate adequate yearly progress in test schools. The legislation also outlined steps to be taken to support low-performing schools and required states to report graduation rates (Pinkus, 2009; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006).

Northwest Ordinance: A plan for Western expansion enacted by the Confederation Congress, the governing body prior to the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, which included a section within the ordinance that required all towns in new states to reserve a section of land for education or the building of schools (Sass, 2011).

Population: The population is all members of a defined group (Carroll, n.d.).

Promoting power: Promoting power compares the number of freshmen at a high school to the number of seniors 4 years later (or the number of 10th graders to seniors 3 years later in schools with a 10–12 grade span; Balfanz & Legters, 2004).

Public education: Free and universal education for students' kindergarten through 12th grade.

Safe environment: A school environment that is prepared for emergencies and creates an environment in which students are able to learn without any threats of physical or emotional harm. A safe school also creates a positive school climate, provides

adequate support to students, and fosters effective school-community partnerships (Center for the Study and Prevention of Violence, 2000).

Sample: A sample is defined as a part or segment of a population that possesses the same characteristics as the population being studied (Carroll, n.d.).

Secondary schools: Referred most commonly as a high school in the U.S. Typically consists of Grades 9–12 or ages 14–18 (Degree Directory, 2011).

Status completion rate: The percentage of 18 to 24 year olds that is not in school and has earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential (NCES, 2010).

Status dropout rate: The number of individuals in a given age range, typically 16 to 24 years old, which are not in school and have not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential (NCES, 2010).

Title One: Part of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. The U.S. Department of Education (2004) states, “The purpose of this title is to ensure that all children have a fair, equal, and significant opportunity to obtain a high-quality education and reach, at a minimum, proficiency on challenging state academic achievement standards and state academic assessments.” (para. 2)

Urban district: The NCES (1990) states an urban district is “a school district with 70% or greater urban population. Urban school districts are classified as Central City, Suburban and Outside Urbanized Area (OUA) according to which of these has the largest population.” (School District Geographic Characteristics section, para.1)

Key Assumptions

The following assumptions are made in this study. A key assumption of this study is that dropout is correlated with some factors that are beyond a school’s control, such as

socioeconomic status (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006; Suh & Suh, 2007; Zvoch, 2006), ethnicity (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Berzin, 2010; Griffin, 2002; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), and gender (Berzin, 2010; Dalton, Glennie, & Ingels, 2009; MacIver, 2011). It was assumed that the ability to reduce the dropout and increase graduation rates is a result of some factors that can be controlled and addressed by schools, districts, and community partners. The study assumes that poor academic performance is a factor that is highly correlated with high school dropout (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006; Cappella & Weinstein, 2001) and is a factor that schools can influence.

It was assumed that absenteeism is a factor that is highly correlated with high school dropout (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Dalton et al., 2009; MacIver, 2011; Neild et al., 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006) and is a factor that schools can influence. The study assumed that behavior problems are factors that are highly correlated with high school dropout (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Boon, 2008; Christle et al., 2007; Lessard et al., 2008; MacIver, 2011; Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2009; Newcomb et al., 2002; Suh & Suh, 2007) and are factors that schools can influence. It was assumed that school climate is also a factor that is highly correlated with high school dropout (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006; Worrell & Hale, 2001) and is a factor that schools can influence.

It was assumed that the researcher would be able to gain access to a leader in each of the five school districts to conduct interviews. For the purposes of this study, a leader was defined as the superintendent, assistant superintendent, board member, or district-level instructional leader. Superintendents, assistant superintendents, and board members are public officials appointed or elected to their position in the school district. Another

assumption for this study was that all respondents would provide accurate and truthful responses to the interview questions. For the purposes of this study, it was assumed that the previous study conducted to identify these five school districts was valid.

Summary

In this country, an alarming number of students, approximately 1.3 million, drop out of school every year (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). A disproportionate number of these students are male, minority, live in urban areas, and represent students from low-income families. Furthermore, almost half of these students attend one of the 1,600 schools that have been labeled dropout factories because 60% or fewer students of the students who start their freshman year are enrolled 4 years later (Balfanz et al., 2010). In California, it is estimated that only two thirds of students graduate on time and approximately 170,000 drop out or fail to graduate every year. The majority of these students are attending a subset of schools that represent approximately 4% of the high schools, yet account for 40% of the dropout in California (California Dropout Research Project, 2008).

While the dropout issue is widespread and affecting many urban, suburban, and rural areas, some school districts are defying the odds and exceeding the graduation rates that are expected for them based on characteristics such as their district size, poverty level, socioeconomic and racial composition, teacher to student ratios, and spending patterns. In 2010, 21 urban school districts demonstrating graduation rates at least 10 percentage points higher than anticipated were identified by the EPE Research Center (Diplomas Count, 2010). The purpose of this study was to identify key strategies for

increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that are exceeding expected graduation rates.

Chapter 2: Review of the Literature

In the United States, it is estimated that 6,500 students drop out of school every school day. Of these, approximately 800 drop out in CA (Diplomas Count, 2011). The number of students dropping out of high school has a significant impact on individuals and society. Dropouts are more likely to be unemployed, receive lower wages if employed (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008; Campolieti, Fang, & Gunderson, 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), and have poorer psychological functioning as adults, particularly among females (Kaplan & Damphousse, 1996). The number of dropouts has a direct impact on state and local economies. For example, in California, the estimated amount of total economic loss per every cohort of 120,000 students who never complete school is \$46.4 billion, which includes approximately \$22.4 billion in lost net earnings, \$6.4 billion in net fiscal costs, \$9.5 billion in crime-related costs, and \$8.3 billion in externalities (California Dropout Research Project, 2008). Conservative estimates show that the nation's economy would have \$335 billion in additional income if the students who dropped out of school in 2009 had graduated from high school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008).

Overall, the number of students dropping out of high school has a significant impact on individuals, families, communities, states, and the nation (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). Despite environmental factors, such as poverty and low parental involvement that have been shown to impact negatively the number of students that graduate high school (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Bridgeland et al., 2006, Shannon & Bylsma, 2006; Suh, Suh, & Houston, 2007), there are a number of factors that a school or school district can control. However, in order to explore these factors, it is first important to understand the

historical context of the issue and of the education system in general. Furthermore, an understanding of relevant education policy and past or current reform strategies will help identify gaps in existing knowledge or practice (Balfanz et al., 2010; Tobergte & Curtis, 2002).

Organization of the Chapter

In this chapter, readers are first presented with a historical overview of the public education system and secondary schools. The next sections synthesize the literature that exists regarding high school dropouts, including how to define dropout, how graduation and dropout rates are calculated, risk factors associated with high school dropout, the impact of high school dropout, education policy related to the issue, and reform strategies. The conceptual framework for the study is also discussed.

Historical Review of the Public Education System

Mid-17th century. The education system in the United States has significantly evolved since the first school, a private school called the Boston Latin School, was established in 1635 for boys from upper middle class families. That same year, a free school was opened in Virginia, but education at this time was still primarily provided at home, especially in the South where education was seen as a private matter that should be free from any interference from the state. In the North, public elementary schools, referred to as charity schools and later common schools, because they were available for the common people, began to flourish because many of the inhabitants were of Puritan heritage for which education was seen as a means of providing religious training (Sass, 2011). Most colonists of Puritan heritage believed that education, especially the study of religion and the Bible, provided students with the ability to resist the devil's temptations.

As a result, the curriculum in schools tended to focus on teaching Puritan values, such as punctuality, honesty, and obedience to authority in addition to providing instruction in religion and Bible studies. These common schools, the forerunner to today's elementary schools, also focused on providing students with basic studies in reading, writing, spelling, and arithmetic (Ornstein et al., 2011).

In 1647, the Massachusetts Law was passed in the Massachusetts Bay Colony that included portions of present-day Massachusetts, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Connecticut. This law required towns of at least 50 families to hire schoolmasters to teach the children in the town to read and write, and required towns of 100 or more families to open a Latin grammar school to prepare students for college. As a result of the Massachusetts Law, the number of common schools and Latin grammar schools began to grow during the 17th century (Sass, 2011).

Eighteenth and 19th centuries. After the Revolutionary War and the adoption of the Declaration of Independence, the issue of whether public education should be provided to citizens became a topic of wide interest in government. In 1787, the Confederation Congress, the governing body prior to the ratification of the U.S. Constitution, enacted the Northwest Ordinance, which provided a plan for western expansion and included a section within the ordinance that required all towns in new states to reserve a section of land for education or the building of schools (Sass, 2011).

After the ratification of the U.S. Constitution in 1788 and the passing of the Bill of Rights in 1791, education became a function of individual states versus the federal government. Among the states, Massachusetts soon became a leader in the public education movement by opening the first public high school, Boston English High School

in 1821, and passing a law in 1827 requiring all towns of more than 500 families to open a public high school (Sass, 2011).

Common schools, which offered elementary education to all students regardless of the family's financial situation, also flourished in Massachusetts. Horace Mann, the Massachusetts commissioner of education and a member of the legislature, was a strong proponent of free public education and advocated for the use of taxes to subsidize common schools in order to ensure that all students had access to what we call an elementary education. Mann argued that free and universal public education was critical for the state in order to supply the new government with citizens who were informed enough to participate effectively in the democratic process. Prior to the availability of common schools, poor children were either educated at home or they attended charity schools where the primary focus was on providing a basic education that consisted of reading, writing, and arithmetic versus preparing students for college. On the other hand, children from affluent families attended private schools, such as Latin schools, where the curriculum was more rigorous and focused on preparing students for college. This separation of poor and affluent students' reinforced class divides among the people. As a result, many education leaders, most notably Horace Mann, advocated for the establishment of common schools that provided a free, universal education to all students regardless of class (Graham, 2005).

As a result of the work done by Horace Mann and other education leaders in Massachusetts, common schools significantly grew within the state during the 19th century (Graham, 2005). The development of the first public high school in 1821 further reinforced the importance of educating youth. Based on these accomplishments,

Massachusetts soon became a model for other states interested in providing public education. Furthermore, mandatory attendance laws, first enacted in 1852 in Massachusetts, also paved the way for similar legislation in other states (Sass, 2011).

Another notable occurrence that took place in the late 19th century was the creation of the Department of Education by the federal government in 1867. The Department of Education was created with the purpose of disseminating educational best practices in order to help states effectively establish school systems. Nevertheless, the role of the Department of Education began to expand with the passage of the Second Morrill Act of 1890, which required the department to oversee support for the land-grant colleges, and the Smith-Hughes Act of 1917, which required the Department of Education to oversee federal aid for vocational education (Sass, 2011).

Twentieth century. In the 20th century, the public education system changed significantly as a result of immigration. In the 20th century, the number of immigrants into America rose exponentially, with more than 18 million people coming to the United States between 1890 and 1920. During this time, school was primarily seen as a way to assimilate or Americanize new immigrants. The goal of many immigrant families was for their children to attend school to learn the basics of reading, writing, and arithmetic and then to leave and work. Consequently, the curriculum within the schools was focused on teaching students the skills and values needed to participate effectively in society (Graham, 2005).

However, in the 1920s, there was a dramatic shift in education. As the number of individuals migrating from rural areas to towns increased, the need to educate students to assume jobs that were more specialized became increasingly important. During this time,

the nation shifted from being a predominantly agrarian society to an urban, industrial society that required a more sophisticated education system. By the middle of the century, more than half of the population resided in communities of 2,500 or more. This resulted in a significant increase in the number of students attending school. This influx of students prompted the reorganization of the school environment. Schools expanded, hired additional teachers, and organized students into grades with the goal of providing more effective instruction. Additionally, the need for more teachers also spurred the rapid expansion of programs to prepare teachers (Graham, 2005).

It is important to note that while most states underwent rapid urbanization and immigration during the 20th century, the Southern states lagged severely behind. Education in the South was limited for White students and virtually nonexistent for Black students. Only about 70% of White Southerners and 56% of Black Southerners between the ages of 6 and 14 attended school compared to 90% of the same age group in the North. Over time, enrollment in public schools in the South did grow, but at a slower rate than the North. Extreme racial tensions and the large number of students residing in remote, rural areas also contributed to the lack of growth in attendance (Graham, 2005).

In the 1920s and after World War I, the focus on assimilating new immigrants slowly dissipated and schools begin to shift their focus instead on helping students adjust to the changing environment of the nation. This shift resulted in an emphasis on educating based on the needs of the child versus the needs of the nation. Consequently, this brought about changes in the curriculum, such as the inclusion of the arts and a concentration on individuality, personality, and experience. After World War 1, the release of *Cardinal Principles of Secondary Education* by the federal government's

Office of Education also reiterated that the role of high schools was beyond academics and should include goals regarding health, civics, and ethics. While these new goals changed the emphasis of most schools, not all schools were able to respond to these new changes effectively. Schools that primarily served middle and upper income students tended to flourish during this time. In contrast, schools with limited resources and that primarily served poorer students did not respond so well to these changes in the school environment. Furthermore, critics also argue that the shift in the curriculum that took place during this time brought about a de-emphasis on academic instruction (Graham, 2005).

Focus on access. The middle and later part of the 20th century was characterized by a demand for more rigorous instruction and access for all—access to enrichment programs for gifted and talented students; access for Black students to schools they were previously excluded from attending; access to more equitable instruction and opportunities for handicapped children, bilingual youth, and girls; and access to more effective instruction for students attending low-income schools. While student access to programs significantly expanded during this time, many critics argue that the quality of programs was not closely monitored. For this reason, wide disparities began to emerge in the quality of programming among different groups, and the educational experience of students varied considerably. For example, the experience for students in the gifted and talented program was vastly different than the experience for students in the public school classroom who were adjusting to desegregation as a result of *Brown v. Board of Education* in 1954 (Graham, 2005). Furthermore, the increase in the birthrate after World War II added enormous strain on the schools in the following decades as enrollment

significantly increased from 26 million at the end of the war to more than 51 million in 1974 and down to 45 million in 1983. These changes in enrollment and desegregation resulted in overcrowding, busing issues, wide variation in the quality of instruction, and teacher shortages.

Federal role in education. On the federal front, after World War II, the role of the Department of Education continued to expand as a result of federal educational policies being enacted. In 1958, the National Defense Education Act, the first comprehensive education policy spurred by the desire to compete more effectively with the Soviet Union, was enacted. This legislation focused on increased postsecondary educational support and improved instruction for students in K-12 in science, mathematics, and foreign language. Civil rights legislation in the 1960s and '70s added civil rights enforcement to the list of responsibilities for the Department of Education. Most notably, the passage of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 expanded the oversight of a number of programs for disadvantaged youth (Department of Education, 2011).

In addition to the federal government becoming more involved in education matters, private foundations and institutions, such as the Ford Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation, also began to work more directly with schools in providing programs and curriculum during this time period. For example, the National Science Foundation dedicated \$134 million in 1968 to fund mostly science curriculum and teacher training. As a result of these federal and private programs, more focus began to be placed on testing and accountability. This emphasis on testing revealed low overall achievement and huge disparities between various subgroups, particularly between White

and Black students. While the test scores of Blacks rose toward the end of the century as a result of increased access to enhanced instruction, the gap between White and Black students continued to intensify (Graham, 2005).

Public opinion of schools. During the mid to late century, schools underwent significant scrutiny in regard to the rigor of instruction. Many books and reports criticizing school organization, academic rigor, leadership, and teacher training were written during this time. In these publications, many argued that the school environment was failing to teach the core academic subjects necessary for future success. These allegations were only substantiated with the release of scores on national tests, such as the Scholastic Aptitude Test, that showed dramatic decreases in overall performance, specifically from the 1950s to the 1970s. The general public also showed signs of discontent with the education system during this time. For example, when asked to rate their local public schools in a national poll, 69% of the public gave their local school a grade of A, B, or C. This number dropped to 63% in 1981 (Graham, 2005).

With the release of the controversial report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983), *A Nation at Risk*, the public was once again alerted to the deteriorating conditions of the public education system. This report specifically highlighted the danger the country would be in if the academic achievement of youth did not improve. Although critics of the report argue that it was too critical, the report did spur significant debate and discussions across the nation. The report also called for specific actions, including more rigorous curriculum, additional funding for education, required academic courses, and enhanced volunteer programs. As a result, a number of policy initiatives were implemented, including tuition tax credits and publicly funded

vouchers for children to attend public school. This also sparked an increased interest in the privatization of education. In response, public choice programs were piloted across many states, giving parents the ability to choose the schools their students would attend, including charter schools, which were becoming increasingly more available. However, the effectiveness of these voucher programs and charter schools remain mixed (Graham, 2005).

In the later part of the 20th century and into the 21st century, the standards-based reform movement began with the release by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics of mathematics standards that defined what students should learn. This sparked a series of efforts to develop standards in other content areas. These standards were developed state by state, often with wide variation from one state to the next. The development of standards also prompted the creation of standardized tests to measure progress to the state standards. An amendment to the Elementary and Secondary Education Act in 1994 further prompted the focus on standards. This amendment set proficiency standards that states must meet with progress measured by state wide standardized tests. However, the standards and the tests were left up to the individual states to create and implement (Barton & Coley, 2011).

Twenty-first century. Moving into the 21st century, the standards movement continued to gain momentum, particularly in the area of testing, and morphed into what is being called the test-based accountability movement. The passage of NCLB by Congress in 2001 only intensified the focus on testing and accountability. This comprehensive legislation reauthorized the 1965 Elementary and Secondary Education Act and added some additional requirements, such as annual student testing for states receiving federal

funding and close tracking of student subgroups on various academic outcomes such as graduation rates. Under NCLB, states receiving federal funding are required to administer state wide standardized tests to students at certain grade levels in order to determine their mastery of state standards. Schools that receive Title I funding are required to make Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) in test scores or steps are taken to improve the schools. For example, schools that miss AYP for 2 consecutive years are labeled in need of improvement and are required to develop specific plans to address the issue; schools that miss AYP for 3 consecutive years are required to provide additional support programs to students; and schools that miss AYP for 4 consecutive years are labeled in need of corrective action and drastic changes such as replacement of whole staff may result. If AYP is still not made after 4 years, this may result in complete restructuring or closing of the school. In addition to AYP, NCLB also requires states and districts to provide yearly report cards that summarize pertinent information about the education system such as student achievement data. Furthermore, NCLB set minimum standards for teacher qualifications and provided significant funding for a new grant program called Reading First, which primarily focuses on literacy for Grades K-3 (Education Week, 2011).

Since the passage of NCLB, there has been significant debate regarding the legislation. Many argue that the legislation set unrealistic goals that could not be met based on available resources. The requirement that AYP be based on the performance of demographic subgroups was also considered to be unfair to school districts that serve diverse students. Hence, the failure of many schools to meet AYP was quickly demonstrated. In 2006, 29% of schools were not meeting AYP, and in 2010, this increased to 38% (Education Week, 2011).

On the other hand, advocates of NCLB assert that the legislation has increased levels of accountability and transparency to the level that is needed to ensure the quality of education in the nation. Despite this support, the majority of educators, parents, and policymakers are critical of the law (Education Week, 2011). In March 2010, the Obama Administration released a blueprint for revising the Elementary and Secondary Education Act and the requirements set forth in NCLB. This blueprint encourages states to add college-and-career-ready standards and makes a series of other recommendations related to accountability. To date, the act has not been reauthorized (Department of Education, 2011).

In addition to the focus on test-based accountability, another significant change to the education environment during the 21st century is the need to prepare students to be prepared for and compete in a global economy. As technology has become more sophisticated, the ability to communicate and work across borders is increasingly more common. Students entering the workforce are now competing with students all around the world. Furthermore, these advances in technology have also changed instruction and the way information is delivered. The integration of technology into the classroom has become widespread and the use of mobile devices has greatly expanded students' access to information and learning. The growth of technology has also led to the development of online schools and flipped classrooms where students complete a significant portion of their instruction online and outside the classroom walls. Most educators and education policy experts agree that in order for students to work effectively and compete in the 21st century, they need to develop necessary information, media, and technology skills (21st Century Schools, 2008).

Another significant trend in education in the 21st century is changing demographics. If current trends continue, minorities will constitute the majority of students attending public schools in 2023. This change will require students to be able to work and live in communities much more diverse than in past generations (Jerald, 2009).

Overall, some significant changes have taken place in the public education environment since the development of the first schools in the mid-17th century. Access to education has greatly increased. As a result, the number of students attending school has significantly increased. The curriculum has also expanded to include instruction in additional content areas, such as the arts, history, technology, and more advanced math and science subjects. The standards-based and test-based accountability movements have shifted the focus to outcomes and accountability. The role of the federal government in education has also grown with the passage of major bills, such as the National Defense Education Act, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, and the No Child Left Behind Act. Last, the need to prepare students for a global, diverse workforce has placed increased pressure on teachers and schools to improve instruction and outcomes (Barton & Coley, 2011; Department of Education, 2011; Education Week, 2011; Graham, 2005; Sass, 2011).

Historical Overview of Secondary Education

The roots of secondary education began in the first half of the 19th century when Benjamin Franklin established the first academy, a forerunner to the high school, which offered a set of basic curriculum in addition to college and teacher preparatory classes for men and women. By 1855, a total of 263,000 students attended one of the 6,000 U.S. academies that had been established. Soon academies began to replace the colonial-

period Latin grammar schools that were primarily focused on educating upper-class males (Ornstein et al., 2011).

While the first high school, designed then for boys 12 years old and older, was established in Massachusetts in 1821, the high school didn't become the primary secondary school for students until after 1860 (Ornstein et al., 2011). In 1874, the use of taxes to support public high schools was upheld by the state Supreme Court of Michigan and this practice was soon replicated in other states (Sass, 2011). As a result of this case, the number of high schools began to grow steadily and soon the number of students attending a high school was double the number of students attending academies (Ornstein et al., 2011).

The growth of secondary schools. In the late 19th and 20th centuries, high schools began to grow as compulsory attendance laws and child labor laws were passed, emphasizing the importance of youth attending school versus working. Furthermore, the industrial revolution created a need for more training to fill new positions; particularly in large urban areas where the population was exponentially growing (Ornstein et al., 2011). While high schools were flourishing, there was still significant debate regarding the purpose of high schools and the curriculum that should be offered. Primarily the debate was focused on whether high schools should prepare students for college or for the workforce, a debate that still continues. In response, the National Education Association, which was established in 1850, created a committee in 1892, the Committee of Ten, made up of leading educators at the time to clarify the purpose of a high school. The committee defined the number of years a student should attend school—8 years of elementary school and 4 years of secondary school. In addition, the committee

recommended that the curriculum should be uniform for all students, college-based, and include instruction in English, foreign language, mathematics, and history.

While this created some uniformity in the types of subjects that should be taught, it still did not end the debate on whether the purpose of high schools should be to prepare students for college or for careers. As a result, there were still several different tracks that were present in high schools in the early 20th century: (a) college-preparatory programs, which taught the basic subjects along with instruction in literature, science, and social studies; (b) business programs, which offered additional instruction in bookkeeping, shorthand, and typing; (c) industrial, vocational, home economics, and agricultural programs; and (d) a general academic program for students who only planned to complete high school. Students were often sorted into a particular track based on previous academic performance, IQ, gender, race, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status (Ornstein et al., 2011).

Quality of secondary schools. While tracking still continued in the mid to late 20th century, it became more a process by student or parent choice. During this time, students had more flexibility and choice in course offerings, but the quality of this educational experience was a topic of much debate. The growing perception, demonstrated by dozens of publications during this time, was that high schools were failing to prepare youth with the knowledge and skills needed to be successful once they graduated (Barton & Coley, 2011). Most notably, *A Nation at Risk* (The National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983) alerted the public to what it coined “a rising tide of mediocrity” (p. 9) in the public school system. This report concluded that the nation’s educational systems were not preparing students to compete successfully in a

global economy. Primarily it argued that the curriculum in schools lacked purpose, provided too many electives that distracted from students taking core academics, and that overall expectations for students had been lowered.

Despite growing concern about the quality of secondary schools in the 20th century, the number of high school graduates increased dramatically in the first half of the century as a result of the expansion of high schools and society's increased focus on secondary education. In 1900, the number of students graduating from high school was only 7%. This number steadily increased to 17% in 1920, 49% in 1940, and 60% in 1954. However, this upward trend did not continue in the second half of the century. Despite the fact that calculations of high school graduation rates vary significantly depending on the measure being used, there is wide agreement that graduation rates peaked in the 1960s, but have slowly declined or remained stagnant since that time. Furthermore, most calculations have also shown that there are substantial differences in the graduation rates of various subgroups. For example, estimates show that Black and Hispanic students graduate at significantly lower rates than their non-Hispanic White peers (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). These disparities have caused widespread concern regarding how to improve the nation's high schools and feeder middle and elementary schools in order to ensure that students are receiving the support they need to graduate successfully from high school. Furthermore, as a result of increased enrollment in the first part of the 20th century, many additional challenges started to emerge, such as overcrowding, teacher shortages, significant achievement gaps between minority versus White students, huge disparities in the quality of schools in low-income versus more affluent neighborhoods, school violence, and poor academic achievement overall. In many neighborhoods,

particularly the inner city, schools have slowly become a breeding ground for violence, drugs, and apathy versus a safe place where students can expand their future opportunities (Graham, 2005).

Another major concern regarding the quality of the nation's secondary schools that has emerged during the second half of the 20th century is the number of students dropping out of school. While most estimates show that the number of students dropping out of school has significantly decreased since the 1960s, there are still a large number of students not completing high school (National Center for Education Statistics, 2011b). In 2007, the number of high school dropouts was estimated to be 16% of the nation's 16 to 24 year olds, or 6.2 million people (The Center for Labor Market Studies, 2009). Yet, the need for at least a high school diploma has become imperative in this increasingly competitive global workforce. According to a report by Harvard's School of Education (2010), out of the 91 million individuals in the workforce in 1973, a third were high school dropouts. During this time, the possibility of high school dropouts earning a middle-class wage was very feasible given the large number of manufacturing jobs available. Over time, these opportunities have dwindled. It is projected that nearly two thirds of all jobs in the next 7 years will not only require a high school diploma, but also postsecondary education.

Overall, the landscape of the public education system, particularly secondary schools, has changed dramatically since the opening of the first high school in the early 19th century. While free and universal education has become a reality for all, the purpose and rigor of schools has been highly debated. If current trends continue, the need for a more educated and specialized workforce is paramount. This will require schools to

increase the quality of the curriculum and instruction as well as significantly reduce the number of students who are dropping out of school.

Definition of a Dropout

While there is widespread agreement that the number of students dropping out of school has a significant impact on the future competitiveness of a nation, there is less agreement on who should be classified as a high school dropout and how to count the number of dropouts. Currently, there is not one standard definition for a dropout although the federal government does provide a recommendation. The federal government's (Department of Education, 2005) definition of a dropout is an individual who:

- (a) was enrolled in a district in grades 9 through 12 at some time during the preceding school year;
- (b) was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year;
- (c) has not graduated or completed a program of studies by the maximum age established by a State;
- (d) has not transferred to another public school district, a nonpublic school, or a State-approved educational program; and
- (e) has not left school because of death, illness, or a school-approved absence. (Definitions section, para. 2)

In addition to the federal government's definition, the NCES also has developed a definition of dropout for use in its calculations of national statistics. According to NCES (2011), the term dropout applies to an individual who:

- was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year;
- was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year;
- has not graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved education program; and

- does not meet any of the following exclusionary conditions: transfer to another public school district, private school, or state- or district-approved education program; temporary absence due to suspension or school-approved illness; or death. (p. 25)

The following statements apply for the purpose of this definition:

- The school year is the 12-month period of time from the first day of school (operationally set as October 1), with dropouts from the previous summer reported for the year and grade in which they fail to enroll.
- Individuals who are not accounted for on October 1 are considered dropouts.
- A school completer is an individual who graduated from high school or completed a state- or district-approved educational program upon receipt of formal recognition from school authorities. A state- or district-approved educational program may consist of special education and district- or state-sponsored GED preparation. (p. 25)

While both the federal definition and the definition by NCES are used by states, there is still a lack of consistency among the states regarding who is counted as a dropout. For example, variation exists on whether states count students who receive an alternative credential, enter the military, enter juvenile delinquency institutions, or register for college before obtaining a high school diploma. In addition to the discrepancies among the states on who is classified as a dropout, there are also differences among the various school districts within the state. Among many districts, there is not a consistent method for tracking students who leave school. As a result, the explanations and coding systems can be inconsistent from one school district to the next. Furthermore, states and districts

also differ regarding when data is collected for dropouts, how they refer to dropouts, and how dropout rates or graduation rates are calculated (Klima, 2007). All of these issues make it difficult to track the progress of states and school districts and identify best practices. Until there is a consistent definition and method for accurately calculating graduation and dropout rates, it will be difficult to measure and monitor the progress we are making as a nation on this issue. As a result of this issue, the US Department of Education released a common measure to calculate graduation rates in the 2010-11 school year. The goal of this measure is to develop a rigorous method for making state-to-state comparisons of graduation rates more reliable. The first set of results will be released near the end of 2012 (U.S. Department of Education, 2012).

Calculating Graduation and Dropout Rates

In the literature, significant debate exists among researchers, educators, and policymakers regarding how to calculate dropout or graduation rates. Multiple measures have been developed to track the number of students who drop out and graduate from high school. Four widely used measures for high school completion are published by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) on a yearly basis—the status completion rate, status dropout rate, event dropout rate, and the averaged freshman graduation rate. In addition to these four measures, other common measures that are used to calculate graduation or dropout rates include the cohort dropout rate, the cumulative promotion index, and promoting power.

Status completion rate. The status completion rate is the percentage of 18 to 24 year olds that is not in school and has not earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential. It is calculated by using data collected by the Bureau of Labor Statistics in the

Current Population Survey. This survey collects educational attainment data every October from a representative sample of 50,000 U.S. households. Critics of the status completion rate argue that it is inaccurate for a number of reasons: (a) Individuals who have received a GED are counted as high school graduates; (b) Those who are in the military and are institutionalized are excluded from the Current Population Survey; (c) The Current Population Survey is only completed by one household member who reports the educational attainment of all members in the household; and (d) The survey includes recent immigrants who have never been enrolled in U.S. schools. Perhaps one of the biggest sources of debate is the inclusion of GED recipients in the calculation. The GED program, created in the early 1940s, was developed for individuals who had joined the military during World War II before they were able to complete the requirements for their high school diploma. The mission of the GED has significantly evolved throughout the years and is often seen as an equivalent of a high school diploma (Heckman & LaFontaine, 2007). However, many critics argue that a GED is not the equivalent of a high school diploma because the majority of individuals with this credential earn considerably less income than traditional high school graduates, have lower social and political participation rates than traditional graduates, and only 12% graduate from a postsecondary institution, compared to 20% of individuals who complete a traditional high school diploma (The National Center for Higher Education Management Systems, n.d.; Patterson, Zang, Song, & Guison-Dowdy, 2010; Song & Hsu, 2008).

Status dropout rate. A second measure of high school graduation by the NCES is the status dropout rate, which calculates the number of individuals in a given age range, typically 16 to 24 years old, who are not in school and have not earned a high

school diploma or alternative credential. This calculation also utilizes the Current Population Survey administered by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (NCES, 2010). Critics of this particular calculation argue that it underestimates the number of dropouts in the U.S. for a number of reasons. First, the calculation divides the number of students who are 16 to 24 years old without a diploma or alternative credential by the total number of 16 to 24 olds in the population. The challenge is that this calculation doesn't take into consideration that many of the students in the total population will eventually drop out of school, especially students in the 18 to 24 year old range who are more likely to drop out of high school because they are older than most students in their grade. Second, the calculation also counts students with a GED as high school graduates rather than dropouts. The challenges with including these individuals in the calculation were discussed earlier. Third, the status dropout rate does not include individuals who are 16 to 24 years old and institutionalized. Individuals in this group are more likely to have higher rates of drop out. By not including this group of students, the rate is positively skewed (Sum et al., 2003).

Event dropout rate. The event dropout rate, sometimes referred to as the annual dropout rate, is also a measure published by the NCES. This calculation shows the percentage of high school students that drops out of school without earning a diploma or alternative credential in a given school year (NCES, 2010). This statistic usually measures the percentage of dropouts across all grades (9-12) in the year (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). The goal is for this statistic to monitor changes in the dropout rate from one year to the next. A criticism of this calculation is that it only captures the number of students who drop out of school during a 1-year period. This may not give an accurate

snapshot of the dropout rate for schools because it does not take into account the number of students who will eventually drop out of school (Greene, 2002).

Averaged freshman graduation rate. The last measure that NCES uses to calculate graduation rates is the averaged freshman graduation rate. This calculation estimates the number of freshman students who will graduate with a regular diploma 4 years after starting their freshman year (NCES, 2010). This is done by comparing the number of graduates to the number of 9th graders enrolled 4 years earlier. The major criticisms of the averaged freshman graduation rate are that the calculation does not adjust for student mobility or population changes that may have occurred during the 4 years (Schmitt & Bush-Richards, 2007).

Cohort dropout rate. In addition to the calculations published by NCES, three other calculations are often used to estimate graduation or dropout rates—the cohort dropout rate, the cumulative promotion index, and promoting power. The cohort dropout rate is the percentage of students who drop out of school within a group or “cohort” of students that start at the same time. This calculation usually shows the percentage of students who begin ninth grade but dropout before they complete 12th grade (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). Similar to the averaged freshman graduation rate, a criticism of this calculation is that it does not adjust for student mobility or population changes.

Cumulative promotion index. Another method of calculating graduation rates is the cumulative promotion index. In the present study, the school districts studied had higher than anticipated graduation rates. The calculation used to determine this was the cumulative promotion index. This method shows the percentage of students that graduates on time with a diploma. This calculation is done by multiplying four grade-to-

grade promotion ratios together (9 to 10, 10 to 11, 11 to 12, 12 to graduation). The cumulative promotion index only counts students as graduates if they complete traditional high school diplomas. Critics of this calculation assert that it is inaccurate because it does not count students who receive alternative credentials, such as a GED, as graduates (Diplomas Count, 2010).

Promoting power. The last widely used method to calculate the number of high school graduates is promoting power. This calculation typically compares the number of seniors enrolled in school to the number of freshmen 4 years earlier. The percentage is calculated by dividing the number of seniors by the number of freshmen 4 years earlier. For example, if a school had 270 students enrolled as freshmen in 2006–2007 school year and had 222 students enrolled as seniors in the 2010–2011 school year, the school's promoting power would be approximately 82%. A school is considered to have a weak promoting power if 50% or less of its freshmen students are promoted to seniors 4 years later. This measure was developed by researchers from Johns Hopkins University to provide a consistent measure of graduation that can be calculated across all public high schools in the nation using enrollment data by grade, which is compiled by the NCES for every public high school in the nation (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). A criticism of this calculation is that it doesn't usually take into consideration changes in student population that take place over the period of 4 years. Another argument is that it may be inaccurate because ninth grade is a year that students often have to repeat. Therefore, the ninth-grade number used to calculate promoting power may consist of students who are repeating the grade versus the actual number of starting freshmen (Greene, 2002).

In summary, there are seven common methods for calculating graduation or dropout rates—status completion rate, status dropout rate, event dropout rate, averaged freshman graduation rate, cohort dropout rate, cumulative promotion index, and promoting power. A summary of these methods is provided in Table 2.

Table 2

Methods for Calculating High School Graduation or Dropout Rates

Method	Explanation
Status Completion Rate (NCES, 2010)	The percentage of 18 to 24 year olds that is not in school and has not earned a high school diploma or an alternative credential.
Status Dropout Rate (NCES, 2010)	The number of individuals in a given age range, typically 16 to 24 years old, which is not in school and has not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential.
Event Dropout Rate (NCES, 2010)	The percentage of high school students who will drop out of school without earning a diploma or alternative credential between the beginning of one school year to the beginning of the next.
Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (Phelps, 2009)	The Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate estimates the proportion of high school freshmen who will graduate in exactly 4 years within the same school or jurisdiction, not taking into account student migration.
Cohort dropout rate (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006)	The percentage of students that drop out from the beginning of ninth grade through the end of 12th grade.
Cumulative Promotion Index (Diplomas Count, 2010)	“This method views high school graduation as a process that encompasses four steps: three grade-to-grade promotions (9 to 10, 10 to 11, and 11 to 12) and earning a diploma (grade 12 to graduation). Each of these individual components corresponds to a grade-promotion ratio. Multiplying these four grade-specific promotion ratios together produces the graduation rate. Only students receiving a standard high school diploma are considered graduates” (p. 30).”
Promoting power (Balfanz & Legters, 2004)	The promoting power compares the number of freshmen at a high school to the number of seniors 4 years later (or the number of 10 th graders to seniors 3 years later in schools with a 10–12 grade span).

Some of the overall criticisms of these calculations are that they do not take into account the number of students who may take longer than 4 years to graduate or students who migrate in and out of school. Critics of these measurements argue that education policymakers should put less pressure on high schools to graduate students on time and more pressure on preparing students for college or workforce training, irrespective of graduation date (Phelps, 2009). Regardless of the method used to calculate graduation or dropout rates, all of them have potential biases as discussed. In order to track more accurately the number of students that graduates, data systems that track individual students over time need to be developed. Some states are making progress toward creating these systems (Balfanz et al., 2010), but the implementation of these systems is not widespread. Until these tracking systems are provided, a variety of measures will need to be looked at to determine trends in graduation and dropout rates.

High School Graduation and Dropout Rates

While the high school graduation rate varies based on how it is calculated, many researchers agree that the number of students graduating with a regular high school diploma has remained fairly consistent throughout the past 10 years. According to an annual report published by *Education Week*, the percentage of students who have graduated from high school with a regular diploma has ranged from 65.7% to 68.8% since 1997 (Diplomas Count, 2010). Data compiled by the NCES also reports a fairly consistent graduation rate since 2001–2002, although the rate is higher based on how it is calculated (Chapman, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2010). The following table presents the averaged freshman graduation rates of public high school students from 2001 to 2009.

Table 3

Averaged Freshmen Graduation Rates of Public High School Students

Year	Rate
2001–2002	72.6
2002–2003	73.9
2003–2004	75.0
2004–2005	74.7
2005–2006	73.2
2006–2007	73.9
2007–2008	74.9
2008–2009	75.5

Note. The Averaged Freshmen Graduation Rates for 2001–2009. Adapted from “Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 1972–2009,” by C. Chapman, J. Laird, and A. KewalRamani, 2011, *National Center for Education Statistics*, p. 52. Copyright 2011 by U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Reprinted and adapted with permission.

With regard to dropout rates, there are three widely used measures for calculating dropout rates: (a) status dropout, (b) event dropout, and (c) cohort dropout. As previously discussed, the event dropout rate estimates the percentage of students that left high school between the beginning of one school year and the beginning of the next without earning a diploma or alternative credential. Between October 2008 and October 2009, 3.4% of students’ 15–24 years old dropped out of Grades 10–12 without earning their diploma or GED. Students who dropped out of ninth grade are not included in this calculation because the event dropout rate, determined by NCES, relies on the Current Population Survey, which doesn’t collect data for students who are in the ninth grade. Of this 3.4% that dropped out of school, there was no significant difference in the number of female versus male dropouts, but there was a significant difference by race/ethnicity. Black and Hispanic students dropped out at significantly higher rates than their White peers—4.8% and 5.8% compared to 2.4% for Whites. Another significant difference in event dropout rates was by socioeconomic status. Students in families that were considered low-income

had an event dropout rate five times greater than students in high-income families. A summary of the event dropout rates for October 2001 through October 2009 is provided in Table 4.

Table 4

Event Dropout Rate Statistics: 2001–2009

Year	Rate
2001	5.0
2002	3.6
2003	4.0
2004	4.7
2005	3.8
2006	3.8
2007	3.5
2008	3.5
2009	3.4

Note. The Event Dropout Rates of 15- through 24-year-olds who dropped out of grades 10-12, 2001-2009. Adapted from “Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 1972-2009,” by C. Chapman, J. Laird, and A. KewalRamani, 2011, *National Center for Education Statistics*, p. 30. Copyright 2011 by U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Reprinted and adapted with permission.

A second widely used calculation for measuring high school dropout is the status dropout rate. This calculation measures the percentage of individuals not enrolled in high school or that does not have a high school diploma or alternative credential. According to NCES (2010), this calculation is usually higher than the event dropout rate because it calculates the percentage of all dropouts 16–24 regardless of when or where they attended school. As a result, individuals who may have never attended school in the United States are included in this calculation.

In October 2009, the number of individuals in the U.S. who did not graduate from high school or earn an alternative credential was 8.1% or approximately 3 million noninstitutionalized civilians between the ages of 16 to 24. Among different subgroups,

males had a higher status dropout rate than females, 9.1% compared to 7.0%.

Additionally, Hispanics had the highest status dropout rate, 17.6% compared to 9.3% for Blacks and 5.2% for Whites. The status dropout rate for 16 to 24 year olds with disabilities was also significantly higher than students without disabilities, 15.5% compared to 7.8% (Chapman, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2011). A summary of the status dropout rates for October 2001 through October 2009 is provided in Table 5.

Table 5

Status Dropout Rate Statistics: 2001–2009

Year	Rate
2001	10.7
2002	10.5
2003	9.9
2004	10.3
2005	9.4
2006	9.3
2007	8.7
2008	8.0
2009	8.1

Note. The Status Dropout Rates, 2001-2009. Adapted from “Trends in high school dropout and completion rates in the United States: 1972-2009,” by C. Chapman, J. Laird, and A. KewalRamani, 2011, *National Center for Education Statistics*, p. 40. Copyright 2011 by U.S. Department of Education. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics. Reprinted and adapted with permission.

While graduation and dropout rates have fluctuated throughout the past 10 years, they have not drastically changed. However, the need for a high school diploma during these years has become increasingly important as jobs that previously required minimal education have been automated or outsourced to other countries (Amos, 2008) and competition among states to attract growth industries has become more fierce (Steinberg & Cheryl, 2008). Furthermore, while the overall graduation and dropout rates have remained fairly consistent, the disparity between the rates of White versus minority

students is continuing to widen. In 2007, the difference in graduation rates between White and Black students was 22.9% and between White and Hispanic/Latino students was 21.1% (Diplomas Count, 2010). Estimates of the dropout rate by subgroup also show a disparity. For example, the percentage of 16 to 24 year olds not in school and that has not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential is 4.8% for White, non-Hispanic students; 9.9% for Black, non-Hispanic students; and 18.3% for Hispanic students (Chapman et al., 2010). It is important to note that dropout rates are not the same for all Latino subgroups. Hess (2000) found Cuban and South American students have dropout rates consistent with the national average; however, Mexican American, Central American, Puerto Rican, and Dominican students have much higher dropout rates.

As evidenced by Figure 1, many minority groups are graduating at significantly lower rates. A 2004 study found that schools where the student body consists of 90% or more of students of color, only 42% of all freshmen advance to Grade 12 (Orfield, Losen, Wald, & Swanson, 2004).

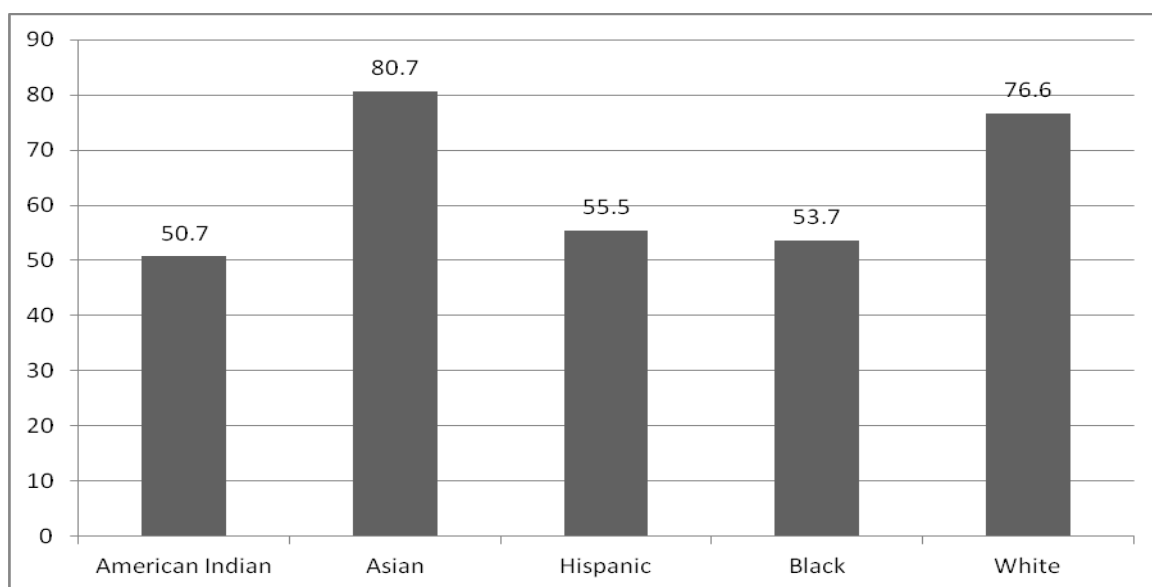


Figure 1. Graduation rates for student subgroups, class of 2007. Adapted from “Diplomas Count,” by the EPE Research Center, 2010, *Education Week*, 29, p. 23. Copyright 2010 by Editorial Projects in Education Inc. Reprinted and adapted with permission.

Overall, as evidenced by all of the different calculations, there is still a significant number of students dropping out of school before earning a diploma, particularly among various subgroups (Chapman et al., 2010; Diplomas Count, 2010; Orfield et al., 2004). The consequences of this phenomenon have a significant impact on society and the individuals who are dropping out of school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006a; Alliance for Excellent Education 2006b).

Risk Factors

Numerous studies have been conducted during the past decade to identify the risk factors associated with students dropping out of school. Primarily, these factors can be organized into three broad categories: (a) student factors (i.e, academic achievement, absenteeism, behavioral problems), (b) social factors (i.e, poverty, lower levels of parental involvement), and (c) school factors (i.e., school organization, school climate; Hess, 2001). Each of these categories is discussed below.

Student factors. Student factors that have been shown to be the strongest predictors of high school dropout include ethnicity (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Berzin, 2010; Griffin, 2002; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), gender (Berzin, 2010; Dalton et al., 2009; MacIver, 2011), poor academic achievement (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Capella & Weinstein, 2001), absenteeism (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Dalton et al., 2009; MacIver, 2011; Neild et al., 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), and behavioral problems (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Boon, 2008; Christle et al., 2007; Lessard et al., 2008; MacIver, 2011; Meeker et al., 2009; Newcomb et al., 2002; Suh & Suh, 2007). As previously discussed, students who are African American, Hispanic/Latino, and Native American have higher rates of dropout than their peers

(Diplomas Count, 2010). In fact, of the 17 states identified in 2009 as the states with the lowest graduation rates, the majority of students attending these schools were minority. For example, in California and New York, 70% of high schools with low graduation rates have 80% or more minority students in attendance (Balfanz et al., 2009). Orfield et al. (2004) found that in every state, except Hawaii, a significant gap existed between the graduation rates of minority versus White students. The high dropout rate among minority students has been attributed to lower educational aspirations (Berzin, 2010), association with peers who place less value on education (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), and higher rates of mobility (Meeker et al., 2009). In a 4-year longitudinal study of the personal beliefs and attitudes of African American youth, results showed that by the 2nd year in high school, African American students had less favorable attitudes about school, reported higher levels of social pressure to drop out, and had lower internal locus of control or belief that they had control over their environment and life (Davis, Ajzen, Saunders, & Williams, 2002).

Another student factor that has been correlated with higher levels of dropout is gender. Males predominately drop out of school at higher rates than females (Berzin, 2010; Dalton et al., 2009; Diplomas Count, 2010; MacIver, 2011). In 2007, the national graduation rate for males was almost 7% lower than females, and in some states, such as Louisiana, Mississippi, and South Carolina, it was more than 10% lower (Diplomas Count, 2010). Studies conducted to understand this difference have revealed that disadvantaged males, particularly those who associate with more violent groups, are more likely not to value an education and have lower educational expectations, which are correlated with higher incidences of high school dropout (Staff & Kreager, 2008).

MacIver (2011) also found that male students are more likely than female students to drop out of school for poor academic performance, such as failing courses and earning fewer credits.

One of the strongest predictors of high school dropout is academic achievement. Poor academic achievement, typically measured by course grades, grade point average, and standardized test scores, is strongly correlated with high school dropout (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Dalton et al., 2009; Hampden-Thompson, Warkentien, & Daniel, 2009; Hickman et al., 2008; Neild et al., 2007; South, Baumer, & Lutz, 2003; Strom & Boster, 2007). In a Bridgeland et al. (2006) study of students who previously dropped out of school, failing school was one of the top reasons students provided for dropping out. South et al. (2003) and Battin-Pearson et al. (2000) both found that low academic achievement was the strongest predictor of success in completing school. Particularly, performance in math and English has been found to be closely associated with school completion (Cappella & Weinstein, 2001; Dalton et al., 2009; Neild et al., 2007). In fact, Dalton et al. (2009) found that math and English teachers were more accurate in predicting drop out than the students. Neild et al. (2007) found that a failing grade in math or English and an attendance rate of less than 80% as early as middle school was highly predictive of later school completion. Poor academic achievement has been found to be indicative of high school completion as early as kindergarten. A longitudinal study of students who later dropped out of school found that these students exhibited lower academic achievement, particularly in reading, mathematics, and English, than their peers as early as kindergarten. This trend persisted as they advanced from grade to grade, and became more pronounced in the middle school grades (Hickman et al., 2008). Students

who are particularly at risk of poor academic achievement and dropout include English-language learners (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006) and special education students (MacIver, 2011).

Closely related to poor academic achievement is absenteeism. Students who drop out of school are more likely to have higher rates of absenteeism than their peers (Bridgeland et al., 2006; Dalton et al., 2009; Neild et al., 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). MacIver (2011) found that almost half of dropouts had a pattern of chronic absenteeism 3 years prior to their ninth-grade year. Interviews with students who previously dropped out of school revealed that a large percentage of students reported that missing too much school was a large factor to their decision to drop out later because they were unable to catch up with their course work (Bridgeland et al., 2006).

According to the literature, two other major student factors associated with high school dropout are the number of students repeating grades and the presence of behavioral problems. Students who repeat a grade because of poor academic performance are significantly more likely to drop out of school (Christle et al., 2007; Dalton et al., 2009; MacIver, 2011; Neild et al., 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). Furthermore, schools with higher retention rates, or students repeating grades, are more likely to have higher dropout rates (Christle et al., 2007). Closely related to this issue are age limitations in the classroom. While requirements may vary by states, most states require school attendance at least until graduation or age 16. In order to reduce the number of students dropping out of school, some states are changing the age requirements for school attendance to be 17 or 18 and linking the ability to obtain a driver's license with high school graduation (Balfanz et al., 2010). Currently, most states allow students to stay in

high school until age 19. After this age, most students attend remedial classes to receive a diploma or a GED certificate. Many states also have adult high schools where students older than the age of 18 can finish the requirements needed to obtain a high school diploma. However, students who do not complete high school by the typical age are significantly more likely to drop out of school (Cataldi, Laird, & KewalRamani, 2009).

Another student factor linked to high school dropout is behavioral problems. Behavioral problems, in school and out of school, have been correlated with higher rates of dropout. Studies show that students who later drop out of school are more likely to exhibit higher rates of detentions and suspensions than their peers (Boon, 2008; Christle et al., 2007; MacIver, 2011; Suh & Suh, 2007). A MacIver (2011) longitudinal study conducted in Baltimore found that 49.5% of dropouts were suspended at least once in the 3 years prior to dropping out compared with 24% of their graduating peers. In addition to behavioral problems in a school environment, general deviance, such as drug use, delinquency, and sexual behavior, has also been associated with higher rates of dropout (Newcomb et al., 2002). In fact, engaging in deviant behavior and bonding to antisocial peers has been shown to increase the likelihood of a student dropping out of school regardless of academic achievement (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). In a Cassel (2003) study, half of the adults, approximately 2 million individuals, residing in prisons were high school dropouts.

In summary, a number of student factors have been identified as key drivers and indicators of high school graduation. The factors most closely linked to dropout include (a) race/ethnicity; (b) gender; (c) academic achievement, particularly in the areas of reading, English, and mathematics; (d) absenteeism; (e) course repeating; and (f)

deviance. In addition to student factors, a number of social factors have also been correlated to high school graduation.

Social factors. According to the research literature, a number of social factors have also been found to correlate with the incidence of high school dropout, most notably socioeconomic status and low parental involvement. Multiple studies to identify risk factors associated with high school dropout have linked socioeconomic status to school completion (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Christle et al., 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006; Suh & Suh, 2007; Zvoch, 2006). In a comparison study of schools with high dropout versus low dropout, schools with consistently high dropout rates had higher percentages of students from low socioeconomic backgrounds (Christle et al., 2007). In a national longitudinal study of youth, students who exhibited at least one of the following risk factors—low GPA, low socioeconomic status, and suspension—were 89.3% more likely to drop out of school versus students who didn't exhibit any of these factors (Suh & Suh, 2007). Furthermore, studies have found that schools that are considered to be low graduation rate high schools disproportionately serve students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. The Alliance for Excellent Education (2010a) states, "Eighty percent of the nation's lowest-performing high schools are considered to be high-poverty schools, where 40 percent or more of students are eligible for free and reduced-price lunch" (p. 5). Numerous studies have shown that students who are living in neighborhoods with higher percentages of poverty, unemployment, and low educational attainment are more likely not to complete school. Possible explanations include the lack of role models from middle-class neighborhoods and reduced social capital (Crowder & South, 2003).

Another social factor closely associated with high school dropout is parental involvement (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Strom & Boster, 2007; Terry, 2008). Specifically, students who have low parental expectations for education are more likely to exhibit poor academic performance, which is one of the strongest predictors of students dropping out of school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000). In a meta-analysis of 13 studies, researchers found that communication between parents and children about school is correlated with high school dropout (Strom & Boster, 2007). Terry (2008) found in a study of 37 dropouts, that seven students, approximately one out of five, stated that their parents played “an active role in their decision to quit school” (p. 4). Additional family factors shown to be related to educational attainment is the education level of parents, particularly the mother, and growing up in a single-parent household from early childhood (Pagani et al., 2008).

Overall, a number of social factors have been directly correlated with students’ decisions to drop out of school. The factors most closely linked to graduation include socioeconomic status, parental engagement, and the education level of parents. Another category of factors related to high school dropout includes school factors.

School factors. The school that students attend has also been associated with the incidence of high school dropout. In 2002, a study released by researchers from Johns Hopkins University identified approximately 2,000 high schools in the United States that account for almost half of all dropouts. These schools, labeled dropout factories, only promote 60% or less of their students from their freshman to senior year. These schools are made up of almost half of the nation’s African American students and nearly 40% of Latino students. The majority of these schools are located in only 15 states, including

Arizona, California, Georgia, Florida, Illinois, Louisiana, Michigan, Mississippi, New Mexico, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Texas.

These schools were identified by examining the promoting power of the school, the number of seniors compared to the number of freshmen 4 years later, for three different cohorts. The schools that were identified as dropout factories were schools that consistently promoted a low percentage of students from their freshman to senior year (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Christle et al. (2007) stated, “Thus, for many students, the school they attend may be the strongest determining factor in their completing versus dropping out of school” (p. 4).

Shannon and Bylsma (2006) also identified a number of school-related factors that impact the dropout rate, including conflict between home and school culture, ineffective discipline systems, lack of adequate counseling, negative school climates, lack of relevant curriculum, school organization and size, and adult-student relations. In a 2006 study of high school dropouts, almost half of the participants interviewed stated that one of the primary reasons they dropped out of school was that they were bored and their earlier school had poorly prepared them for the future (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Additionally, in this study, “only 56 percent of students said that they could go to a staff person for help with school problems and just two-fifths (41 percent) reported that they had someone in school to talk to about personal problems” (p. 7).

Another school factor that has been linked to school completion is student engagement. Archambault, Janosz, Morizot, and Pagani, L. (2009) found that students who report low engagement at the start of high school present higher risks for later dropout. This was particularly true among males and students with a history of low

academic achievement. A number of factors were identified as being closely associated with disengagement throughout the years, including gender (being male), having low intellectual skills, and a past history of underachievement.

Brown and Rodríguez (2009) substantiated the role that schools play in a student's engagement by examining two students who dropped out of school. Results demonstrated that the students' disengagement from school was largely influenced by their interaction with the school environment and adults within the school. Finn and Rock (1997) also found in a study of 1,800 minority and low-income youth that low student engagement led to low academic resilience, which is associated with higher dropout rates.

In summary, a number of student, social, and school-related factors have been identified as risk factors for high school dropout. The strongest predictors of high school dropout include poor academic achievement, socioeconomic status, low educational expectations, and behavioral problems. Table 6 summarizes the risk factors associated with high school dropout.

Table 6

Summary of Risk Factors for Dropout

Category	Risk Factors
Student factors	Ethnicity Mobility Gender Poor academic achievement Absenteeism Behavioral problems Peer associations Repeating grades Low educational expectations

(continued)

Category	Risk Factors
Social factors	Socioeconomic status Parental involvement
School factors	Conflict between home and school culture Ineffective discipline systems Lack of adequate counseling Negative school climates Lack of relevant curriculum School organization and size Adult-student relations

In addition to understanding the risk factors associated with dropout, it is also important to understand when students are most at risk for disengaging and dropping out of school. Based on the research, the most critical points for students are the transition years, particularly the transition from middle school to high school, and the middle grade years (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004). According to Cohen and Smerdon (2009), the majority of students drop out of school after their freshman year of high school although they send early distress signals, such as chronic absenteeism and course failures much earlier. During the transition from middle to high school, students struggle with increased academic stress, anxiety about how to deal with the new social situations in high school, and the disruption of relationships with teachers and peers from middle school. Researchers argue that any high school reform efforts should be focused on ensuring the successful transition of students from middle to high school. Previous studies substantiate the effectiveness of targeting programs at the transition years. For example, in a study conducted to evaluate the effectiveness of a program geared for ninth grade students, results showed that the dropout rate for students who were involved in the transition program were much lower than ninth grade students who were not enrolled in the program. The conclusion of the study emphasized the need for educators to develop

programs, particularly at the critical developmental and academic transition years such as middle school and the transition from middle to high school (Somers, & Piliawsky, 2004).

The middle school years, Grades 6–8, are also critical intervention years in relation to high school dropout. This period of time is often associated with decreased motivation, poor self-perceptions, and declines in academic achievement. Students who exhibit signs of falling behind in sixth grade are significantly more likely to drop out of school before their junior year begins (Balfanz, 2009). Furthermore, the gap between the lowest and highest performing students widens considerably during the middle school years (Blackwell, Trzesniewski, & Dweck, 2007; Wigfield, Lutz, & Wagner, 2005).

As demonstrated above, ample research exists to identify the factors that contribute to the number of students who drop out of school and to understand when students are most at risk. Another facet of the dropout issue that is well documented in the literature is the impact of dropout, particularly on individuals and society.

Impact of Dropout

The dropout crisis in America's educational system has a devastating impact on the future health of the economy. Nearly every year, only 70% of students complete high school on time and earn a diploma. In 2007, 3.3 million 16 through 24 year olds were not enrolled in high school and had not earned a high school diploma or alternative credential (NCES, 2009).

The dropout crisis directly affects the U.S. economy. Throughout the course of a student's lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about \$260,000 less than a

high school graduate (Levin, 2005) and contributes about \$60,000 less in taxes (Rouse, 2005). America's Promise Alliance (2010) states:

Young people who drop out are twice as likely as graduates to be unemployed; three times as likely to live in poverty; eight times more likely to wind up in prison; and twice as likely to become the parent of a child who drops out of school. (p. 1)

The economic benefits of increasing the graduation rate among students are evident. For example, if the male graduation rate were increased by only 5%, the nation would see an annual savings of \$4.9 billion in crime-related costs (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006a). Results of an analysis show that cutting the dropout rate of minorities in half would produce varied economic benefits, including approximately \$1.6 billion in increased spending, \$636 million in investments, and 17,000 new jobs as a result of the increased spending. According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2008), the nation's economy would benefit from nearly \$335 billion in additional income over time if the students who dropped out of the Class of 2009 had graduated and \$17 billion in Medicaid and expenditures for health care (Alliance for Excellent Education 2006b). Levin, Belfield, Muennig, and Rouse (2007) calculated that the net economic benefit for every new high school graduate is \$127,000 per student.

While the number of students dropping out of school has only slightly increased during the last quarter century, the necessity for a high school completion has never been greater because of the pressures of competing successfully in a global economy (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). In fact, one of the most important determinants of employment status, income, and health is an individual's level of educational attainment (Levin et al., 2007).

As a result of heightened awareness around this issue, policymakers have explored how the government should be involved in and what support should be provided to states to increase graduation rates and reduce dropout.

Relevant Education Policy

Concern regarding the number of students dropping out of high school surfaced as a serious national issue with the release of the 1983 report, *A Nation at Risk*, which painted a dismal picture of the state of education in the country and heightened awareness regarding the number of students dropping out of school. Since that time, a number of initiatives has been implemented in order to address this issue such as the National Goal 2000 initiative in the 1990s, which established a goal of a 90% graduation rate by the year 2000, and the NCLB legislation, signed into law in January 2002, which required states to report graduation rates and address low performing schools (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). The current administration has also focused on addressing the dropout issue by providing funding opportunities through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 to develop longitudinal data tracking systems that more accurately measure graduation rates as well as early warning systems that identify students at greatest risk for high school dropout (Balfanz et al., 2010). In addition to action at the federal level, many states are also addressing the issue from a policy perspective.

Princiotta and Reyna (2009) outlined four action steps that governors could take to increase graduation rates and decrease dropout, including promoting graduation for all, targeting youth at greatest risk for dropout, reengaging youth who have already dropped out, and providing more options for students to obtain a high school diploma. In the report, specific actions were recommended such as raising the maximum compulsory and

allowable school attendance ages, monitoring the graduation rates at the state level and including them in accountability measures for the state, ensuring that school districts have the proper support for increasing graduation rates, and assigning state officials to the responsibility of dropout prevention and recovery. The report also encouraged governors to help in the development of early warning data systems that allow schools to identify students at-risk of dropping out of school so they can receive additional supports. Other recommendations outlined in the report were incentives for dropout recovery, programs geared for out-of-school youth, and creating reentry programs for juvenile offenders. The last call to action in the report was for governors to support the development of new school models and programs focused on dropout prevention and award credit to those programs that demonstrate success.

Another report by Steinberg and Cheryl (2008) outlined five commitments that state leaders can take to increase graduation rates. These commitments focused on not only graduating students, but also ensuring students are college and career-ready.

The commitments include: (a) Ensuring a high school diploma signifies college and work-readiness; (b) Ensuring there are pathways to graduation and college success for struggling and out-of-school students; (c) Focusing on the turnaround of low-performing high schools; (d) Having an increased emphasis on graduation rates and college-readiness in next-generation accountability, which should consider additional accountability indicators and incentives to hold schools and districts accountable; (e) Providing early and continuous support for struggling students. (p. 4)

Many leaders from the state government, education sector, and business sector are

working together to create a collaborative solution to addressing this issue. One example of this is the American Diploma Program, which consists of a network of governors, state superintendents, business executives, and college and university leaders. This group is focused on improving the nation's high schools and includes leaders from 26 states. This group is specifically focused on increasing the rigor of standards and curriculum, aligning high schools with postsecondary education and workforce demands, and holding schools accountable (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009).

In summary, a number of policy initiatives have been initiated to reduce the number of students not completing high school. Table 7 provides a summary of some of these initiatives.

Table 7

Summary of Policy Initiatives

Initiative	Description
A Nation at Risk	Report issued in 1983 that heightened awareness of issue
National Goal 2000	Initiative in the 1990s that established a goal of a 90% graduation rate by the year 2000
NCLB	Legislation, signed into law in January 2002, which required states to report graduation rates and address low performing schools.
American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009	This act provided federal funding to states and districts to develop longitudinal data tracking systems that more accurately measure graduation rates and develop early warning systems that identify students at greatest risk for high school dropout.
America Diploma Project	A network of governors, state superintendents, business executives, and college and university leaders, from 26 states, focused on improving the nation's high schools by increasing the rigor of standards and curriculum, aligning high schools with postsecondary education and workforce demand, and holding schools accountable.

High School Reform Strategies

While ample research exists to quantify the significant impact of high school dropouts on society (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006a; Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008; Alliance for Excellent Education, 2010b; Amos, 2008; Campolieti et al., 2010) and to identify the factors that contribute to students dropping out of school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Christle et al., 2007; Hess & Copeland, 2001; Lessard et al., 2008; McNeal, 1997; Neild et al., 2007; Newcomb et al., 2002; Suh et al., 2007; Terry, 2008; Worrell & Hale, 2001), more research is needed to understand what works at the school and district level to increase graduation rates. Throughout the past several years, positive steps have been taken in order to address the high school dropout issue and identify promising interventions at the macro and micro levels. Some of these steps and promising practices are identified below.

Macro-level strategies. Macro-level strategies that have been enacted across many states to address high school dropout include increasing the age students are permitted to drop out of school and adopting the Common Core Standards to standardize learning expectations. At the state and district level, more robust data systems are also being developed to track graduation rates and individual students over time in order to monitor dropout rates and identify students who may be at a greater risk of dropping out. Furthermore, schools and states are also developing programs to increase teacher effectiveness, such as peer coaching, professional learning communities, and teacher assessments systems; developing parent engagement strategies; targeting feeder elementary and middle schools; and creating interventions at key transition years, including fifth to sixth grade and eighth to ninth grade (Balfanz et al., 2010).

Other macro-level reform efforts have focused on identifying appropriate strategies based on the concentration and placement of low-graduation high schools in the state. Almeida et al. (2009) identified different strategies that can be used to reform the nation's low-graduation-rate high schools based on the geographic spread of those schools in the state. For example, Almeida et al. recommended that states that have at least half of their low-graduation-rate high schools concentrated in one or two major cities to adopt a city-wide approach. In this approach, the city takes a lead role in transforming schools by creating innovative approaches that get students back on track or deciding to replace low-graduation high schools. The report recommended states with a relatively low number of low-graduation schools spread across urban, suburban, and rural communities use more statewide strategies, such as public-private partnerships to redesign schools and innovative school designs. In single-school districts, Almeida et al. suggests that local community leaders need to be engaged in the reform process in order to make effective change. Last, Almeida et al. recommended states that are in crisis, because of the large number of low-graduation high schools, explore the possibility of more federal support in order to address the major financial obstacles that may be associated with reform.

In addition to developing different approaches to reform based on the distribution of low-graduation high schools, different school models are also being tested as possible strategies to addressing low graduation rates and high dropout. For example, research has shown that smaller schools may be more successful at increasing graduation rates by presenting fewer obstacles to reform and providing more opportunity for mentoring services (Almeida et al., 2009; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Werblow & Duesbery, 2009).

McNeal (1997) found that school models that employ lower teacher-to-student ratios have significantly lower dropout rates.

The infusion of career and technical education in the curriculum of high schools is also a school model that has demonstrated success. Previous studies have linked positive educational outcomes such as increased likelihood of high school graduation to participation in career and technical education courses (Kulik, 1998; Plank, DeLuca, & Estacion, 2005). As funding for career and technical education programs are decreasing on the federal and state level, some educators argue that a powerful intervention to support students in achieving graduation is being threatened.

Another strategy that has received considerable attention in the literature is promoting the development of professional learning communities. The goal of professional learning communities is to develop a culture in a school and district where there is shared ownership of student outcomes (Richardson, 2011). The focus is on building collaboration. In this model, a team of teachers works to identify the needs of students and the most appropriate response. The learning in professional learning communities encompasses both student and adult learning. The goal is to improve student learning through an ongoing process of inquiry and action research to learn and implement the best interventions for students. In this approach, DuFour (2011) states the school creates “a systematic process that ensures that students who are struggling receive additional time and support for learning” (p. 61). Previous research has linked professional learning communities to a decrease in student absenteeism, achievement gaps, and high school dropout (Hord, 1997).

Micro-level strategies. In addition to macro-level changes, many research and reform efforts have been focused on the school and individual level. For example, Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) identified specific strategies that are common in successful school programs. These strategies include opportunities for mentorship, case management of individual students, family outreach, changes to existing curriculum to ensure relevancy or provide an emphasis in English and math, and assistance for students with out-of-school problems.

Azzam (2007) identified school strategies that more effectively engage students, such as integrating experiential learning into the curriculum so students can understand the relevance of what they are learning in the classroom to the real world and using a variety of instructional methods in order to accommodate for different learning styles. In addition, Azzam discussed the importance of providing students who are most at risk with the support they need such as access to high quality teachers, individualized instruction, parent engagement strategies, and mentoring opportunities. Bemak, Chi-Ying, and Siroskey-Sabdo (2005) also discussed the importance of ensuring students have access to a caring adult or mentor. More specifically, the authors discussed the important role that school counselors can play in helping students address personal and interpersonal issues that distract them from focusing on school, particularly among students who are at greater risk of dropout. Knesting (2008) also described the importance of providing students' access to caring and committed adults or teachers at the school. In fact, the study found that providing students with this type of support was more important to a student's school persistence than academic or counseling support.

In addition to the importance of having support from committed teachers and counselors, reform efforts have also focused on ensuring effective leadership at all levels, including principals and assistant principals. School leaders need to be sustainable. In other words, they need to be engaged and focused over an extended period of time on motivating students and teachers to work together to achieve a common goal, such as student achievement, grade completion, and graduation. Hyatt, Schmieder-Ramirez, and Madjidi (2010) conducted a Delphi study focused on the behaviors of sustainable leaders, or those who provide leadership continuity. The authors identified four central behaviors, including a focus on getting results, executing strategies and change, being decisive, and having a solid work ethic. These behaviors are applicable to leadership in a school environment and, therefore, could inform various reform efforts.

While policymakers and education experts are studying and implementing various reform efforts across the nation, these efforts need to take into account the obstacles for high school reform. For example, reform efforts in high schools are often hampered because of the large populations of students and the fact that high schools tend to be more decentralized or organized into departments (Noguera, 2002). Furthermore, the age of high school students also reduces the likelihood of success. Students at this age group often have more distractions and less parental involvement (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000).

Despite these challenges, many high schools are still successful. For example, DuBois High School in Baltimore has had success in improving graduation rates by implementing a myriad of macro- and micro-level interventions. The school has focused attention on reducing chronic absenteeism by more closely monitoring individual students, reducing the number of suspensions by providing alternatives to suspension,

collaborating with community partners, implementing youth development programs, and providing more public school options. All of these efforts have shifted the culture from focusing on overall yearly progress to ensuring that all students have the support they need to graduate school (Aarons, 2010). Successful interventions that show promising results in improving graduation rates but need to be studied more include the development of efficient tracking systems to ensure students are on track for graduation, focus on improving attendance, improved after-school tutoring programs, support for English-language learners, focus on teacher support and effectiveness, mentoring programs, individualized plans for struggling students, collaboration, and developing collaborative programs at feeder middle schools (Duke & Jacobson, 2011).

A number of reform efforts have also focused on interventions at critical transition points such as ninth grade because they have been correlated with students' decisions to drop out of school (Hickman et al., 2008; Lan & Lanthier, 2003; McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010). Successful programs that have been implemented to address the challenge of transition from middle to high school include freshmen academies and programs targeted at middle schools that prepare students prior to starting their freshman year (McCallumore & Sparapani, 2010).

In summary, a large number of states, districts, and schools are implementing a myriad of strategies to address the high school dropout issue and to improve graduation rates. While some of these strategies are showing promising results, more empirical evidence is needed to show which reform strategies have the greatest impact. A summary of reform efforts is provided in Table 8.

Table 8

High School Reform Strategies

Strategies
Focus on community collaboration
Strong leadership
Evidence-based teaching practices
Raising the age students can drop out of school
Standardizing learning standards across states
Developing early warning systems
Creating longitudinal tracking systems
Increasing teacher effectiveness
Parent engagement strategies
Targeting feeder schools and transition programs
Smaller school models
Mentoring programs
Career and technical education
Experiential-based curriculum
Differentiated instruction
Enhanced counseling services

Conceptual Framework

In order to provide more focus to the study, it was important to identify the key priorities of high-performing schools. Numerous studies have been conducted to identify the priorities most closely associated with high-performing high schools. Edmonds (1977) conducted a comprehensive study to identify schools that were instructionally effective for students from low socioeconomic backgrounds. To conduct his study, a random sample of 2,500 students from 20 schools was chosen. The mean math and reading scores for these students were compared to the citywide norms. These particular scores were chosen because they have been shown to be most indicative of a students' future academic success. From this analysis, a total of five schools were judged to be effective in teaching both reading and math because the mean scores of students from those schools scored above the city average grade equivalent scores. The results of this

study demonstrated that a student's socioeconomic background does not solely determine student academic success. It also substantiated that a school's instructional effectiveness is not dependent on the background of the students who attend the school.

In 1982, Edmonds used this work and additional research to develop an effective schools model which was expanded upon by his colleagues at Michigan State and Harvard University after his untimely death in 1983. This model identified seven priorities of effective or successful schools: (a) a clear and focused school mission that is clearly articulated and shared among school personnel; (b) a safe and orderly environment where students and staff are free from harm and in an environment conducive to learning; (c) an environment of high expectations where staff believe that all students have the capacity to learn and succeed; (d) a focus on providing instruction in basic skills areas and opportunities to participate in learning activities that provide hands-on instruction in these areas; (e) instructional leadership by the principal, who clearly articulates the mission of the school to all stakeholders and ensures the alignment of the instructional programs to that mission; (f) frequent monitoring of student progress by using multiple assessment methods to monitor mastery of core content and improve instructional practices; and (g) positive home-school relations centered on providing parents the opportunity to help the school achieve its overall mission (Lake Forest College, 2010).

Murphy and Hallinger (2001) also conducted an exploratory study of 12 school districts in California that were considered instructionally effective based on the results of standardized tests. The primary data collection method included interviews with the leaders of these 12 school districts. Seventeen themes were identified and categorized

under four broad categories: (a) conditions, (b) climate factors, (c) characteristics of curriculum and instruction, and (d) organizational dynamics.

Under the category of conditions, three main priorities emerged as consistent among the 12 school districts that were studied: (a) labor peace, (b) board support, and (c) community acceptance. Within these districts, the relationships between teachers and administrators were positive or neutral. In all of the school districts, there also appeared to be strong consensus and support between the board of education and the superintendent of the school district. The final condition that was consistently seen across the school districts was community acceptance. In these school districts, the outside community was very accepting of the activities of the school (Murphy & Hallinger, 2001).

In the category of climate factors, a number of patterns that characterized the environment of the school district emerged. The first was a focus on productivity. In the 12 school districts, a standard of excellence existed. A top priority in all of these school districts was improving student learning. This filtered down to ensuring excellence in a number of outcomes, not just student achievement. Under the category of climate, there was also an improvement focus consistently seen across the school district. Despite proved success, these districts were still focused on systematic improvement to ensure the successful completion of all stated goals. The study also revealed a problem-solving focus in which problems were seen as opportunities versus barriers. Across the school districts, there was a sense of improvement versus hopelessness. Another pattern related to climate was a focus on long-term improvement versus short-term change. In order to drive change and decision making, data were used as an additional resource to make an

informed decision. These two components, having a long-term view and using data to drive change, were described as patterns of instrumental orientation. The last pattern across the school districts that fit the category of climate was an internal focus.

Superintendents in each of the 12 districts were integrally involved in district operations. This focus on the inside allowed them to be more involved in the success at the individual school level. To keep informed in larger issues in the community, they relied upon formal community groups for information (Murphy & Hallinger, 2001).

According to Murphy and Hallinger (2001), the third category of successful patterns falls under the broad category of curriculum and instruction. Patterns that were observed among the school districts included being goal driven, having established curriculum and instructional practices, ensuring the consistency and coordination of instructional activities, exhibiting leadership from the superintendent in instructional matters, and ongoing monitoring of activities and outcomes. In the districts observed, goals at the district level drove school goals, and in turn, these goals drove classroom curriculum goals and objectives. In addition, the majority of the goals in the district were focused on curricular and instructional issues. This focus on curriculum drove excellence and improvement. Further, there was a high degree of consistency across the school district in regard to curriculum. Many of the districts had preferred instructional practices that all teachers utilized, district-wide curriculum objectives, single textbook adoptions to ensure consistency in instruction from one school to the next, and requirements that principals possess a strong understanding of curriculum and instructional practices. Superintendents at these school districts were also heavily involved in curriculum

decisions by setting goals and providing professional development activities (Murphy & Hallinger, 2001).

The last category of patterns or priorities that Murphy and Hallinger (2001) observed among successful schools was organizational dynamics. This category primarily centered on the balance between conflicting priorities, such as district control and school autonomy. The observed school districts were able to balance rationality with minimal bureaucracy. While there were systems and rules in place, they were not there for the sake of having consistent processes. Instead, these rules and systems were fulfilling the purpose for which they were created and they were living and adaptive versus rigid and unchanging. Additionally, the school districts were also able to maintain school autonomy despite the forced consistency among schools. This was achieved through funneled decision making. While goals were set at the district level, principals and schools provided considerable input into implementation and decision making. Another pattern observed under organizational dynamics was the balance between efficient systems and people orientation. While the focus at the district level ensured student success, staff needs were not ignored. Superintendents spent time developing a relationship with the teachers and principals in their districts. While superintendents exhibited strong leadership capabilities, they consistently utilized the expertise of their administrative staff and made decisions based on collective knowledge. They also expected principals to have the right people skills needed to be effective school leaders.

The International Center for Leadership in Education conducted another significant body of work that identifies key priorities of successful schools. This organization, founded in 1991, was created to assist schools in ensuring that all students

have access to a rigorous and relevant curriculum that is essential for students' postschool success. In order to identify successful schools' key priorities, the center first conducted seven meta-analyses to consolidate the findings that have been done on successful school models. Though this work was useful, the center soon realized through feedback from schools that there was a need to identify specific priorities. Through support from the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and the Council of Chief State School Officers, the center conducted a study on the most successful high schools along with their feeder middle and elementary schools to identify what key priorities they had in common (Daggett, 2005).

According to Daggett (2005), the results of the study identified nine priorities focused on high performance in high schools:

1. Focus instruction around students' interests, learning styles, and aptitudes through a variety of small learning community approaches—most commonly academics.
2. Administrators and teachers share an unrelenting commitment to excellence for all students, especially in the areas of literacy.
3. An extraordinary commitment of resources and attention to ninth grade students.
4. A rigorous and relevant twelfth grade year.
5. A laser-like focus on data at the classroom level to make daily instructional decisions for individual students.
6. High-quality curriculum and instruction that focuses on rigor and relevance.
7. Provide students with adults with whom they can develop personal relationships and be allowed the opportunity to use reflective thought.

8. Focus and maintain professional development around a limited number of high-impact initiatives.
9. Solid and dedicated leadership. (p. 4)

The results of this work helped contribute to the development of the Successful Practices Network, created to help schools develop action plans to implement the priorities and strategies of high performance. In order to identify schools for this network, the International Center for Leadership in Education developed a list of criteria to be used to identify highly successful schools. These criteria include high academic performance measured by state and national tests scores, the presence of additional programs that extend beyond teaching the basic core areas, community engagement in the school, and opportunities within the school for students to develop socially and personally. A rubric to measure success in these four areas was developed in order to identify schools with proved success. These schools helped develop an action plan that any K-12 school system could implement in order to build a successful school model. The International Center for Leadership in Education and the Successful Practices Network identified seven central actions that schools need to implement in order to improve success for all students. These actions tie back to the nine priorities that were previously identified by the center (Daggett, 2005).

The first action that schools need to take is to create a culture that supports change. This involves ensuring that all stakeholders—teachers, parents, school administrators, boards, and students—understand the need to assess and modify existing processes and programs to ensure they are preparing adequately students for the future. The second action is developing a focus on instruction rather than structure. Instead of

making major school structural changes that highly disrupt learning in the classroom, this action focuses on increasing the rigor and relevance of instruction at the classroom level. Once this has been achieved, schools can then explore structural changes that have been shown to be effective such as the development of small learning communities. The third action is developing relationships within the building. This step involves creating an environment where all students have access to one or more adults who provide them ongoing, individualized support on a consistent basis. An example of this type of support is assigning a peer coach, usual an upper-classman and a faculty member coach to every freshman student. This step also includes close monitoring of individual student's progress by teachers and ongoing feedback to parents regarding their student's progress. The next action involves aligning the curriculum to the needs of special education and English as a Second Language students and then adapting it for average to above-average students. This is the opposite of how most schools design curriculum. This step involves determining the needs of the hardest to serve students first and building on that. Another critical step outlined by the International Center for Leadership in Education is to use data to make decisions about what content is critical for students to know and to provide professional development that helps teachers understand the steps needed to use data to make decisions at the classroom level. The next action that schools need to take to be successful is to focus on the transition years, particularly eighth to ninth grade. High-performing schools take additional steps to ensure that eighth grade students and their parents feel connected to the high school before they even start. This involves communication between the faculty of the middle and high schools regarding the academic needs of individual students, including their strengths and weaknesses. The

final action step the group recommended in order to have a successful school is ensuring there is adequate support provided at the district and state levels, particularly in the areas of curriculum support, assessment, and professional development (Daggett, 2005).

In 2002, another comprehensive study was conducted by the state of Washington and the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction to explore how some schools are performing at consistently high levels despite operating in an environment characterized by wide achievement gaps and low performance. In a review of more than 20 studies, nine key priorities were identified as typical of high-performing schools. The studies revealed that most high-performing schools exhibited at least five of these priorities at a time. In 2006, these key priorities were validated by a panel of reviewers and additional ideas for implementation were given (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). The nine priorities identified in the original study and validated in 2006 include (a) having a clear and shared focus; (b) setting high standards and expectations for all students; (c) having effective school leadership; (d) ensuring high levels of collaboration and communication; (e) aligning curriculum, instruction, and assessment with standards; (f) frequently monitoring learning and teaching; (g) focusing professional development; (h) creating a supportive learning environment; and (i) maintaining high levels of family and community involvement. A shared and clear focus involves having a consistent direction based on common beliefs and values that all stakeholders understand and accept. High-performing schools ensure that consensus is built around goals and that these goals are data driven and focused on student achievement. Schools that are consistently high performing have a culture built on high expectations and the belief that all students can learn and meet high standards. Furthermore, leaders create an environment that is conducive to learning

and professional growth. Leaders in high-performing schools exhibit similar characteristics such as leading by example, being student-focused, focusing on empowering staff, being comfortable leading change, creating professional learning communities, and creating cultures that promote risk-taking and innovation (Shannon & Bylsma, 2006).

According to Shannon and Bylsma (2006), schools that are high performing also create an environment focused on collaboration among teachers, administrators, and parents in order to drive student success. Specific implementation practices that encourage collaboration include common planning time for teachers, team teaching, and professional development that enhance collaboration and teamwork. Further, in high-performing schools, curriculum and assessment are aligned and teachers utilize research-based instructional strategies. Assessments are incorporated into instruction in order to ensure student mastery of key content. High-performing schools frequently monitor learning and teaching through ongoing student assessments and teacher evaluations. These results are used to adapt and improve instructional programs as well as determine if supportive services or additional instructional time is needed for students. Results are also used to focus professional development to ensure that teachers are receiving instruction in areas of high need. Professional development is also aligned to district and state goals.

The last two priorities among high performing schools that were discussed by Shannon and Bylsma (2006) are creating a supportive learning environment and having high levels of family and community involvement. This involves ensuring that students are safe, respected, engaged in learning, and connected to school staff. In order to achieve

this, there should be clear and reasonable expectations for behavior and personalized learning environments. In this type of environment, students feel valued and part of the school. High-performing schools also translate that commitment and shared ownership to parents and members of the community by encouraging parent involvement and building partnerships with businesses and organizations in the community.

Across all the studies discussed, six key priorities emerged among high-performing schools. These key priorities include (a) providing students with a safe and supportive learning environment, (b) developing a culture of high expectations for all students, (c) ensuring effective leadership at all levels, (d) data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance, (e) strong collaboration between teachers and administrators, and (f) high levels of parent and community support and engagement. Table 9 summarizes the key priorities identified along with the research to support these key priorities. These key priorities served as the conceptual framework for the current study.

Table 9

Key Priorities Among High-Performing Schools

Key Priorities	Theorists
Safe and supportive learning environment	Daggett (2005) Edmonds (1982) Schapps (2003) Shannon & Bylsma (2006) Smith (2011)
Culture of high expectations for all students	Daggett (2005) Edmonds (1982) Lee (2003) Murphy & Hallinger (2001) Shannon & Bylsma (2006)

(continued)

Key Priorities	Theorists
Effective leadership at all levels	Bush (2009) Cotton (2003) Daggett (2005) Edmonds (1982) Nettles & Herrington (2007) Shannon & Bylsma (2006)
Data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance	Brunner et al., (2005) Daggett (2005) Edmonds (1982) Murphy & Hallinger (2001) Shannon & Bylsma (2006)
Strong collaboration between teachers and administrators	Bloom (2004) Daggett (2005) Murphy & Hallinger (2001) Shannon & Bylsma (2006) Stewart (2008)
High levels of parent and community support and engagement	Carter (2002) Edmonds (1982) Hands (2010) Henderson (1987) Jeynes (2005) Murphy & Hallinger (2001) Shannon & Bylsma (2006)

Summary

In the United States, approximately 6,500 students drop out of school every school day. Of these, approximately 800 drop out in CA every school day (Diplomas Count, 2011). The number of students dropping out of high school has a significant impact on individuals and society. The dropout crisis directly affects the U.S. economy. Throughout the course of a student's lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about \$260,000 less than a high school graduate (Levin, 2005) and contributes about \$60,000 less in taxes (Rouse, 2005). Ample research has been conducted to identify the risk factors associated with students dropping out of school. Primarily these factors can be organized into three broad categories: student factors (academic achievement,

absenteeism, behavioral problems, etc.), social factors (poverty, lower levels of parental involvement, etc.), and school factors (school organization, school climate, etc.; Hess & Copeland, 2001). A number of initiatives at the policy level have focused on addressing the number of students not completing high school. The current administration has focused on addressing the dropout issue by providing funding opportunities through the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 to develop longitudinal data tracking systems that more accurately measure graduation rates and early warning systems that identify students at greatest risk for high school dropout (Balfanz et al., 2010). A large number of states, districts, and schools are also implementing a myriad of strategies to address the high school dropout issue and to improve graduation rates. These strategies have included a focus on community collaboration, evidence-based teaching practices, more robust data systems, programs to increase teacher effectiveness, parent engagement strategies, targeting feeder elementary and middle schools, and providing interventions at key transition years. In a synthesis of prominent studies, six key priorities emerged among high-performing schools. These key priorities include (a) providing students with a safe and supportive learning environment, (b) developing a culture of high expectations for all students, (c) ensuring effective leadership at all levels, (d) data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance, (e) strong collaboration between teachers and administrators, and (f) high levels of parent and community support and engagement. Despite these studies, more evidence is needed to understand what key strategies and interventions are successful in implementing these priorities and improving high school graduation rates, particularly among school districts with environmental factors that have been shown to influence negatively graduation rates. This gap in the knowledge base

demonstrates a need for more research to identify the commonalities among successful districts in order to develop scalable and replicable district-wide models across the nation, while still considering that some degree of flexibility and customization is needed based on community and school factors.

Chapter 3: Methods

In 2011, an estimated 1.2 million students failed to graduate high school (Diplomas Count, 2011). Students who drop out of school are more likely to live in poverty, be unemployed, and have poorer psychological functioning as adults (America's Promise Alliance, 2010; Kaplan & Damphousse, 1996). The need to support youth toward their quest for graduation is a responsibility of parents, teachers, school administrators, and policymakers. However, in order to have a positive impact on reducing dropout and increasing graduation rates, the key strategies and programs that have the highest potential for impact should be identified. While numerous reform efforts are taking place in school districts across the country, there is need to identify the strategies that are having the most success. The purpose of this study was to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that are exceeding expected graduation rates (Diplomas Count, 2010). In these districts, the high school graduation rates are at least 10% above what is expected or estimated based on their district size, poverty level, socioeconomic and racial composition, teacher to student ratios, and spending patterns. The study took an in-depth look at these school districts in order to understand the key strategies that are contributing to their success.

Although there are numerous studies on risk factors for dropout and the impact this issue has on individuals and society, more research is needed to identify school-specific strategies for addressing this issue, particularly among schools with environmental factors that have been shown to negatively influence graduation rates. This gap in the knowledge base demonstrates a need for more research to identify the

commonalities among districts that are having success. These commonalities could be used to develop scalable and replicable district-wide models.

Organization of the Chapter

In this chapter, readers are presented with detailed information regarding the methodology of the study, including the research design, research questions, data collection plan, instrumentation, and analysis plan. The protection of human subjects and the limitations of the study are also discussed.

Approach

In the study, a qualitative approach was used to explore the key strategies that five school districts in California, which are exceeding expected graduation rates, are implementing. According to Creswell (2007), a qualitative approach allows the researcher to get a complex, detailed understanding of an issue that can only be gathered by talking directly to the individuals involved. Bloomberg and Volpe (2008) state that qualitative research promotes a deep understanding of an issue and emphasizes exploration, discovery, and description. The use of a qualitative approach for this study was particularly useful because the goal was to understand from the perspective of a leader in the district the key strategies that have been successful despite the presence of environmental factors that have been shown to impede progress such as school district size, teacher to student ratios, per pupil spending, and racial and socioeconomic composition. This type of detailed information cannot be easily obtained through a quantitative survey, but through the use of interviews, the researcher was able to explore these key strategies in more detail.

Another reason for utilizing a qualitative approach for this study is that the majority of studies that have been conducted to understand key strategies of high performing schools have utilized a quantitative approach. Through these studies, researchers have identified trends, associations, and relationships. The goal of this study was to follow-up on these quantitative studies in order to gain more insight regarding the thoughts and behaviors that lead to particular decisions, interventions, or approaches.

In order to explore these key strategies, a four-stage research design was implemented. The first phase included an extensive literature review of the topics most relevant to the study, including the history of secondary schools, the definition of dropouts, dropout and graduation rate calculations, risk factors associated with dropout, impact of dropout, relevant education policies, and reform strategies. This literature review is provided in Chapter 2. The second phase of the research design included the development of the research plan, interview protocol, and the validation of the data collection instrument. The third phase of the study was data collection, which consisted of interviews with leaders in each of the five school districts. The fourth and final stage of the research design was the analysis of data.

The qualitative methodology used for this study was case study research. Creswell (2007) stated, "Case study research involves the study of an issue through one or more cases within a bounded system" (p. 73). In this study, multiple bounded systems were examined in order to uncover key strategies that potentially lead to higher graduation rates. These multiple bounded systems were the five school districts identified by the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center as school districts that are defying expectations regarding graduation rates (Diplomas Count, 2010). The type of case study

that was utilized is collective case study. In a collective case study, multiple cases are used to illustrate the issue (Creswell, 2007). In the present study, the issue was school districts that are defying graduation rate expectations. According to the EPE Research Center, these school districts are graduating students at higher rates than anticipated despite the presence of environmental factors that are negatively correlated with lower graduation rates such as higher student-to-teacher ratios, large district size, higher spending levels on a per-pupil basis, and high concentrations of poor or minority students (Swanson, 2010). In the study, these cases or districts and the key strategies that they are implementing to promote higher graduation rates were explored through in-depth interviews.

Restatement of Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that are exceeding expected graduation rates (Diplomas Count, 2010). These five school districts are exceeding expectations based on their district size, poverty level, socioeconomic makeup, and spending patterns. In order to identify the key strategies that are contributing to their success, the following research questions were used:

1. What are the key strategies for providing a safe and supportive learning environment?
2. What are the key strategies for developing a culture of high expectations for all students?
3. What are the key strategies for ensuring effective leadership at all levels?

4. What are the key strategies for data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance?
5. What are the key strategies for ensuring strong collaboration between teachers and administrators?
6. What are the key strategies for maintaining high levels of parent and community support and engagement?

These questions were developed based on a review of the literature to identify key priorities of high-performing schools. Based on this review, six priorities emerged as similar among high-performing schools. These priorities include (a) providing students with a safe and supportive learning environment (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), (b) developing a culture of high expectations for all students (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), (c) ensuring effective leadership at all levels (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), (d) data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), (e) strong collaboration between teachers and administrators (Daggett, 2005; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), and (f) high levels of parent and community support and engagement (Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). These priorities served as the conceptual framework for developing the research questions.

Population and Sample

The current study used a purposive sampling approach. According to Creswell (2007), a purposive approach is most appropriate to use if the individual or data source

provides insight into the research questions or issue being explored. In this study, a sample of school districts that are exceeding expected graduation rates were examined. A sample is defined as a part or segment of a population that possesses the same characteristics as the entire population being studied (Carroll, n.d.). On the other hand, the population is all members of a defined group. In this study, the population consists of 21 school districts that were identified in a study by the EPE Research Center as school districts in the U.S. that are exceeding expected graduation rates (Diplomas Count, 2010). A sample of these 21 school districts was examined in the current study in order to identify key strategies that contribute to their success. Five school districts were chosen from the sample, representing approximately 24% of the population. These school districts comprise five of the California districts that were identified. These districts were specifically chosen because they are defying expectations in a region and state that is consistently producing a high number of dropouts in the United States (Balfanz et al., 2010). Understanding the key strategies that contribute to their success could potentially identify strategies that are replicable in other schools and districts across the state.

According to the EPE Research Center, these five school districts have graduation rates at least 10% higher than what is expected based on their district size (measured by student enrollment), teacher to student ratios, per-pupil spending levels, and demographic makeup (Diplomas Count, 2010). According to research conducted by the EPE Research Center, school districts similar in makeup to the five districts being explored in this study are more likely to have lower graduation rates because they are larger, have higher student-to-teacher ratios, and higher spending levels on a per-pupil basis. Based on research by the EPE Research Center, school districts with similar profiles are

systematically associated with slightly to moderately lower graduation rates.

Additionally, if the districts have high concentrations of poor or minority students, the likelihood they will have lower graduation rates is greater (Swanson, 2010).

Using these findings, the EPE Research Center created a model to generate a predicted graduation-rate value for a school district. Through this statistical model, the center developed an algorithm to identify the largest urban school district systems that are similar with regard to the factors discussed above—school district size, teacher to student ratios, urban locations, per pupil spending, and racial and socioeconomic composition. From this algorithm, 151 urban school districts with similar profiles were identified. Of these, 21 school districts were identified as overachievers because their graduation rates were at least 10% higher than the other 130 school districts with similar structural and demographic features. Of these, five school districts were identified. These five school districts are located in California—a state that has one of the lowest graduation rates in the nation (Swanson, 2010). These five school districts include: (a) Hemet Unified (Hemet, CA), (b) Madera Unified (Madera, CA), (c) Visalia Unified (Visalia, CA), (d) Long Beach Unified (Long Beach, CA), and (e) Riverside Unified (Riverside, CA). It is important to note that all of the districts identified are unified districts, which includes both primary schools and high schools under the same district control. Furthermore, these districts were categorized as urban by the EPE Research Center.

The first school district, Hemet Unified, had a graduation rate of 65% for the class of 2007, 13% higher than the predicted value of 52% (Swanson, 2010). This school district, located approximately 1½ hours southeast of Los Angeles, has a current student enrollment of approximately 22,000. Of these, 63% are minority, including 49% of

Hispanic or Latino origin. These percentages are slightly higher than what was reported for the 2006–2007 school year—approximately 57% minority, with 42% of Hispanic or Latino origin. The district has 23 schools—15 elementary schools, four middle schools, and four high schools. Approximately 64% of students qualify for free and reduced lunch (California Department of Education, n.d.).

Long Beach Unified School District. This school district, located approximately 30 minutes south of Los Angeles, has 80 schools, which includes seven high schools. The total enrollment for the district is approximately 85,000. In the 2010–2011 school year, 83% of the students were minority, including 53% who were of Hispanic/Latino origin. In the 2006–2007 school year, the percentage of minority students was 83%, predominately of Hispanic or Latino origin (51%). Approximately 66% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch (Long Beach Unified School District, n.d.). This school district was identified by the EPE Research Center as a district that defies expectations because the graduation rate for the class of 2007 was 61%, approximately 11% higher than the predicted 50% (Swanson, 2010).

Madera Unified School District, located approximately 3 hours southeast of San Francisco, has a total school enrollment of approximately 19,000 students. The district has 26 schools, including two high schools, and a student body that was approximately 86% minority in the 2006–2007 school year. Of these, the largest majority were of Hispanic or Latino origin (81%). This racial/ethnic breakdown has increased slightly since that time. In the 2010–2011 school year, the number of students that were minority was 90%. Of these students, approximately 84% were identified as Hispanic or Latino. Approximately 77% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch (Madera Unified

School District, n.d.). The Madera Unified School District had a graduation rate of 66% for the class of 2007, more than 15% higher than the predicted graduation rate value of 51% (Swanson, 2010).

Riverside Unified School District is located in Riverside, CA, which is approximately 1 hour east of Los Angeles. This school district had a graduation rate of 67% for the class of 2007, 12% higher than the predicted 55% (Swanson, 2010). The school district has a total enrollment of 42,000. In the 2006–2007 school year, approximately 67% of the students were minority, predominately of Hispanic or Latino origin (52%). Since that time, the enrollment of minority students has slightly increased. In the 2010–2011 school year, 71% of the students were minority, with Hispanic/Latinos representing the largest group (56%). The district has 41 schools, including five high schools. The percentage of students that qualifies for free and reduced lunch is 56% (Riverside Unified School District, n.d.).

The last school district in this study that was identified in the Diplomas Count (2010) report as a district exceeding expectations was Visalia Unified School District, which is located in Visalia, CA, approximately 3 hours northeast of Los Angeles. According to Swanson (2010), this school district had a graduation rate of 74% for the class of 2007, 18% higher than the predicted graduation rate value of 56%. The school district has of 39 schools, including four high schools. The total enrollment for the district is approximately 26,000. The percentage of students that was minority for the 2006–2007 school year was 66%, with 55% of these students identifying as Latino or Hispanic. This racial/ethnic breakdown has increased slightly since that time. In the 2010–2011 school year, the number of students who were minority was 72%. Of these students,

approximately 61% identified as Hispanic or Latino. Approximately 60% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch (Visalia Unified School District, n.d.).

In summary, all five of these school districts are defying expectations according to their predicted graduation rate value calculated by the EPE Research Center. Table 10 summarizes the information presented above, including the anticipated versus actual graduation rates. The goal of this study was to identify the key strategies that are contributing to their success.

Table 10

Summary of Relevant Statistics for the Five School Districts

District	Pop./ Number of High Schools	% Minority (2011)	% Minority (2007)	Grad. Rate Actual (2007)	Grad. Rate Expected (2007)	Expectations Index (Actual Minus Expected)
Hemet Unified (Hemet, CA)	22,000/4	63%	57%	65%	52%	+13
Long Beach Unified (Long Beach, CA)	85,000/7	83%	83%	61%	50%	+11
Madera Unified (Madera, CA)	19,000/2	90%	86%	66%	51%	+15
Riverside Unified (Riverside, CA)	42,000/5	71%	67%	67%	55%	+12
Visalia Unified (Visalia, CA)	26,000/4	72%	66%	74%	56%	+18

Note. Adapted from “Diplomas Count,” by EPE Research Center, 2010, *Education Week*, 29, p. 26. Copyright 2010 by Editorial Projects in Education Inc. Reprinted and adapted with permission from Editorial Projects in Education.

Data Collection

In order to identify key strategies that are being implemented to increase graduation rates among these school districts, in-depth interviews were conducted with at least one leader from each school district. For the purposes of this study, a leader was defined as the superintendent, assistant superintendent, board member, or district-level instructional leader. Superintendents, assistant superintendents, and board members are public officials appointed or elected to their position in the school district. In a district, the superintendent is primarily responsible for enhancing the educational program of students, improving student achievement, and ensuring that district policies are implemented. The assistant superintendent assists the superintendent in this role. Board members help determine educational policy in a district.

In this study, an in-depth interview was conducted in each of these five school districts with at least one leader in the district. Some of the districts identified multiple individuals that they wanted to be part of the interview process. The goal of these interviews was to understand, from the perspective of the leaders in these districts, the key strategies that have promoted high school graduation. Using the conceptual framework identified in Chapter 2, the interviews explored the implementation of key strategies that are consistent with the priorities of high-performing schools, such as (a) providing students with a safe and supportive learning environment (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), (b) developing a culture of high expectations for all students (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), (c) ensuring effective leadership at all levels (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), (d) data-driven decision making and monitoring of

student performance (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), (e) strong collaboration between teachers and administrators (Daggett, 2005; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), and (f) high levels of parent and community support and engagement (Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006).

A semi structured interview process was utilized for this study. In this process, an interview guide with a list of questions and topics is used to ensure that all the research questions are explored. Semi structured interviews are advantageous when you only have the chance to interview an individual one time. The use of the interview guide allows for consistency in the interview process so multiple interviews can be analyzed for similarities (Robert Wood Johnson Foundation, 2008).

The interviews were conducted via phone or Skype. In terms of process, the researcher sent the interviewee a recruitment email and the interview questions ahead of time for review. The researcher also obtained consent from the interviewee prior to the interview. The consent form was reviewed again immediately before the interview. The interviews were recorded and detailed notes were taken. The recording was transcribed for analysis purposes.

Instrumentation

An interview protocol was developed in order to provide structure to the interview process. This protocol included nine open-ended questions that were based on the conceptual framework. The protocol is provided in Appendix A.

Validity. A critical step in the development of an interview protocol is establishing the validity of the instrument. Establishing the validity means ensuring the

interview protocol measures what it intends to measure. In this case, establishing validity was ensuring that the questions effectively explored the key strategies that these five school districts in California exceeding expected graduation rates have implemented. In order to establish content validity of the interview protocol, a panel of experts was asked to review the protocol and assess whether the questions would yield data that is relevant to the research questions. Three individuals who are knowledgeable in research and education were chosen to be part of the expert panel. These individuals were sent a letter describing the review process, an abstract that provides pertinent background information, and a form for submitting feedback. The Expert Panel Review letter and form are provided in Appendix B and C. Through this process the questions for the interview were validated. The strategies for establishing validity and reliability of the research data are discussed in the upcoming sections, Establishing Trustworthiness and Ensuring Reliability.

Protection of Research Subjects

In 1974, the National Research Act was enacted. This act established the National Commission for the Protection of Human Subjects of Biomedical and Behavioral Research that was charged with setting guidelines for all biomedical and behavioral research involving human subjects. The ethical guidelines that were created by the commission were summarized in the Belmont Report, which outlined requirements related to informed consent, risk/benefit assessment, and the selection of subjects of research (National Institutes of Health, n.d.). In this study, the interviewees were asked to complete an informed consent form that provided the following information: a summary of the research procedures, the purpose of the study, risks and anticipated benefits,

discussion of confidentiality, discussion of how the results will be shared, a description of the recording of the interview, and a statement outlining the voluntary nature of participation. The consent form is provided in Appendix D. This form was provided to all interview participants prior to the gathering of data.

As required by Pepperdine University, the researcher submitted an application to the Institutional Review Board for approval of the research study. A request was made for an exempt review because the following criteria applied (Feltner, 2005):

- The study fit into one of the categories under 45 CFR 46.101(b). Specifically, it is research conducted in an established educational setting that involves normal practices such as research on regular instructional strategies.
- The study did not involve vulnerable populations (e.g., pregnant women, fetuses, prisoners, mentally handicapped).
- The study posed minimal risk to participants.

Data Analysis Techniques

The present study used a qualitative method to gather in-depth information from leaders in five school districts that are exceeding expected graduation rates. To explore what key strategies these school districts are implementing to promote higher graduation rates, interviews were conducted with leaders in each of these school districts. Interview transcripts and notes were analyzed using content analysis. This method allows the researcher to identify key themes and patterns from the data by coding the responses into categories. The analysis process employed a method similar to the following (Hyatt, 2010; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009):

1. The interviews were recorded. The recording was transcribed and identifying information was removed. The data were cleaned for clarity.
2. The interview participants verified the accuracy of the transcriptions.
3. The researcher read all the transcripts multiple times before coding.
4. The first step in the coding process was bracketing. The researcher went through the interview transcript and highlighted key phrases. After bracketing was done for the entire transcript, the researcher identified the key themes throughout the transcript and wrote them on the left margin. This process was done for all interview transcripts. The key themes across all transcripts were reviewed to determine the primary themes across all the interviews. A primary theme was a word or phrase that was mentioned by 60% of the participants. These were written in the right margins of the transcripts.
5. The coding scheme was tested by using intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability is a measure of agreement among individuals who are applying codes to text data (Kurasaki, 2000).
6. Once high inter-coder reliability was reached, meaning was drawn from the data based on commonalities in the interviews.

Establishing Trustworthiness

In a quantitative study, the researcher is concerned with whether the results are valid and reliable. A valid study accurately reflects the world being described and a reliable study is one where another researcher studying the same issue would be able to produce compatible results. On the other hand, in a qualitative study, the researcher is

concerned with how well the descriptions and analysis represent the reality of the situation and persons studied.

Currently, there is debate in the field regarding what terminology should be used to describe rigor in qualitative studies. Many researchers prefer to use the terms validity and reliability in order to be consistent with the hard sciences, while others object to these terms and prefer words such as credibility, dependability, and transferability (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). “Credibility refers to whether the participants’ perceptions match up with the researcher’s portrayal of them” (p. 77). “Dependability refers to whether one can track the processes and procedures used to collect and interpret data” (p. 77). “Transferability refers to how and in what ways the findings of a particular study might apply or be useful in other similar contexts” (p. 15). Regardless of the terms used, the goal is to evaluate the trustworthiness of the research. In the current study, the following steps were taken to evaluate the trustworthiness of the research:

1. The researcher used the process of reflexivity to monitor researcher bias. In this method, the researcher engages in a continuous process of reflection and analysis to identify potential biases and to minimize their possible effect in the study (Watt, 2007). According to Steier (1991), reflexivity can best be understood as “turning back one’s experience on oneself” (p. 2).
2. A consistent interview protocol that was evaluated by an outside panel of experts was utilized to collect data.
3. The interviews were transcribed. The accuracy of the transcriptions was verified with the interview participants.

4. An audit trail was created. The audit trail includes detailed explanations of how data were collected and analyzed (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).
5. Inter-rater reliability was used to establish dependability. This process involves having another individual code the interviews to check the consistency between raters (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008).

Ensuring Reliability

As discussed in the previous section, reliability refers to whether another researcher studying the same issue would be able to produce compatible results. A method used to establish reliability is inter-rater reliability. This method allows the researcher to determine which themes or conclusions best depict the phenomenon being studied. The present study used inter-rater reliability to ensure the results were reliable. According to Hyatt (2010), the following steps are used to determine inter-rater reliability:

1. The primary researcher first codes the data by reading the transcripts, suspending or “bracketing” preconceptions about the topic (Creswell, 2007), initially treating all data under investigation as equally important, and then synthesizing the data by subscribing meaning units to the data in the left margin and structural descriptions and conclusions in the right margin.
2. The additional rater(s) are then trained by the primary researcher regarding the coding process, including the themes.
3. An excerpt of the text is then used by the primary researcher in order to ensure that the rater(s) understand the coding process.

4. The rater(s) is/are given a clean copy of the data for coding. The copy analyzed by the primary researcher is kept.
5. The transcription is read a minimum of three times by the rater(s).
6. The first reading is primarily focused on understanding the data from the transcripts.
7. The second reading is to become more familiar with the data and to address any questions from the first time the data were read.
8. The third reading is to analyze the data by applying bracketing for reduction, horizontalization, and synthesis of the data.
9. The rater(s) works with the primary researcher to code one selected transcript.
10. Meaning units are placed on the left margin while conclusions and structural descriptions are entered on the right margin.
11. The same analysis process is used by the rater(s) for all of the remaining transcripts but the primary researcher does not assist. All raters work independently.
12. After analysis, the primary researcher and rater(s) review the conclusions.
13. During the review process, the agreed-upon themes and the areas of discrepancy are tracked.
14. Consensus is reached on the conclusions and a form is created to identify overall themes.
15. Hyatt (2010) recommends explicating criteria used for major and minor themes.

Limitations of the Study

The purpose of the study was to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that are exceeding expected graduation rates (Diplomas Count, 2010). The following limitations apply to the current study:

1. Findings of this study cannot be generalized to all school settings. Results may be dependent on various school and community demographics. As a result, findings in other parts of the U.S. may yield different results.
2. The population in this study is limited to unified school districts where the primary schools and high schools under a specific geographic area are under the same district control. Findings from districts that are not unified may produce different results.
3. The population in this study is limited to school districts in California that are demonstrating higher than anticipated graduation rates. This study was based on findings from the EPE Research Center that identified a total of 21 school districts in the nation that were defying expectations. The results of this study are limited to a sample of five districts. The other 15 districts may produce similar or contradictory findings.
4. The study is subject to the weaknesses inherent in the interview questions that were used in the study.
5. Graduation rates are reported and calculated using many different methods. The most accurate way to report graduation rates is to track individual students' and their progress through school. While some states are currently in

the process of developing these comprehensive data tracking systems, these data are not widely available. The current study used the cumulative promotion index as the primary method of obtaining graduation rates. Other calculations may yield different results.

6. This study was limited to the perspective of leaders in the school district. Results from any other stakeholder group may yield different responses. For the purposes of this study, a leader was defined as the superintendent, assistant superintendent, board member, or district-level instructional leader.
7. The conceptual framework was limited to past and current literature that is available.
8. The study utilized a qualitative design, which limits the ability to quantify findings or compare to a population. This method reflects one approach to conducting this study and is not intended to be the complete picture. A quantitative approach could also be utilized to provide a different or additional perspective.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that are exceeding expected graduation rates according to the EPE Research Center (Diplomas Count, 2010). In order to explore these key strategies, a qualitative approach was used. This approach allowed the researcher to gather in-depth information that cannot be easily obtained through a quantitative survey. Semi structured interviews were conducted with leaders in each of the five districts to understand, from the perspective of

the leaders, why the school district is having success despite environmental factors that have been shown to impede progress. The interviews were conducted via phone or Skype and were recorded and transcribed. In order to conduct the interviews, an interview protocol, based on the conceptual framework, was developed for use during the research process. An expert review panel validated this protocol. During the data collection and analysis phases of the research, several strategies were employed in order to increase the trustworthiness of the findings. These strategies included the creation of an audit trail, transcription and verification of the interviews, and inter-rater reliability.

Chapter 4: Results

An alarming number of students drop out of school each year. The need for a high school diploma as a minimum has become more important in this increasingly complex global economy where jobs require higher skills and education. In order to ensure students complete the requirements for a high school diploma and do not drop out of school, many individuals, including parents, educators, policymakers, and researchers, need to work together to identify successful strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. The need to identify effective strategies among schools that are having success despite the presence of environmental factors known to impede progress is critical. The environmental factors linked to lower graduation rates include higher student-to-teacher ratios, large district sizes, and high concentrations of poor or minority students (Swanson, 2010). The present study uses a qualitative approach to identify strategies to increase high school graduation rates. A sample of school districts that were exceeding expected graduation rates despite the presence of these environmental factors were examined (Diplomas Count, 2010).

Organization of the Chapter

In this chapter, readers are provided a brief overview of the study, including a restatement of the purpose and the research questions. Profile of the districts and the leaders who were interviewed are provided. Next, a detailed overview of the data collection procedures, data analysis, and steps to ensure validity and reliability is discussed. The data collected and analyzed are presented by research question and corresponding interview questions. The chapter concludes with a brief summary.

Overview

The purpose of the study. The purpose of this study was to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that were exceeding expected graduation rates (Diplomas Count, 2010). Leaders within each district were interviewed to identify the strategies contributing to their success. For the purposes of this study, a leader was defined as the superintendent, assistant superintendent, board member, or district-level instructional leader. Superintendents, assistant superintendents, and board members are public officials appointed or elected to their positions in the school district.

Research questions. In this study, the following research questions were explored through the interviews:

1. What are the key strategies for providing a safe and supportive learning environment?
2. What are the key strategies for developing a culture of high expectations for all students?
3. What are the key strategies for ensuring effective leadership at all levels?
4. What are the key strategies for data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance?
5. What are the key strategies for ensuring strong collaboration between teachers and administrators?
6. What are the key strategies for maintaining high levels of parent and community support and engagement?

Participant profile. Five schools districts in California that were exceeding expected graduation rates according to the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center were examined. These districts are listed below in alphabetical order.

- Hemet Unified (Hemet, CA): This school district consists of approximately 22,000 students. There are four high schools in the district. Approximately 63% of the students are minority and 64% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. In 2007, the graduation rate of the district was 65%. The expected graduation rate for that same year based on the analysis of districts with a similar profile was 52%.
- Long Beach Unified (Long Beach, CA): This school district consists of approximately 85,000 students. There are seven high schools in the district. Approximately 83% of the students are minority and 66% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. In 2007, the graduation rate of the district was 61%. The expected graduation rate for that same year was 50%.
- Madera Unified (Madera, CA): This school district consists of approximately 19,000 students. There are two high schools in the district. Approximately 90% of the students are minority and 77% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. In 2007, the graduation rate of the district was 66%. The expected graduation rate for that same year was 51%.
- Riverside Unified (Riverside, CA): This school district consists of approximately 42,000 students. There are five high schools in the district. Approximately 71% of the students are minority and 56% of the students

qualify for free and reduced lunch. In 2007, the graduation rate of the district was 67%. The expected graduation rate for that same year was 55%.

- Visalia Unified (Visalia, CA): This school district consists of approximately 26,000 students. There are four high schools in the district. Approximately 72% of the students are minority and 60% of the students qualify for free and reduced lunch. In 2007, the graduation rate of the district was 74%. The expected graduation rate for that same year was 56%.

In this study, at least one leader from each of the five districts was interviewed. In some of the districts, two individuals were interviewed as a result of recommendations from the superintendent or other district leaders. Overall, 8 participants who met the criteria of serving as superintendent, assistant superintendent, board member, or district-level instructional leader were interviewed. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours in length. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. Participants verified the accuracy of the transcriptions. Code letters were assigned to each participant in order to maintain confidentiality. All transcripts and notes from the interviews were locked in a secured file cabinet. All documentation for the interviews will be kept in a secure cabinet for 5 years and then destroyed according to the guidelines for the protection of human subjects.

All participants had been in their current role for at least 1 year and served in a leadership role in their respective school district. Participants included 3 superintendents, 2 assistant superintendents, 2 board members, and 1 instructional services specialist for Grades 7 through 12. Five of the participants were male and 3 were female. Four of the participants had a doctorate of education, 3 had a master's degree, and 1 had a bachelor's

degree in elementary education. Table 11 provides a summary of the demographic characteristics of the interview participants, in no particular order.

Table 11

Participants' Demographic Information

Participant	Male	Female	Doctorate Degree	Master's Degree	Bachelor's Degree	Years in position
1	X		X			2
2	X			X		4
3	X			X		1
4	X		X			2
5		X	X			3
6		X	X			6
7		X			X	22
8	X			X		8

Participant 1. Participant 1 holds the position of superintendent. He has been in the position for approximately 2 years. His educational background includes a doctorate in education technology. Previous positions have included curriculum and instruction administrator, elementary principal, and high school counselor.

Participant 2. Participant 2 holds the position of area superintendent for Grades 7 through 12. He has been in the position for 4 years. His educational background includes a master's of arts. Previous positions have included teacher, counselor, coach, assistant principal, and principal.

Participant 3. Participant 3 holds the position of superintendent. He has been in the position for 1 year. He has a master's degree in curriculum and instruction and has approximately 20 years in education. Previous positions have included secondary teacher, counselor, assistant principal, elementary principal, area director, district-level administrator, and assistant superintendent of support services.

Participant 4. Participant 4 holds the position of superintendent. He has been in the position for 2 years. He has a doctorate in educational policy, curriculum, and instruction. Prior to his current position, he was a superintendent in three other states and was a teacher at the elementary-school level.

Participant 5. Participant 5 holds the position of assistant superintendent of educational services. She has been in the position for 5 years. She holds an Ed.D. in educational leadership. She has previously served as a principal and area manager.

Participant 6. Participant 6 holds the position of instructional services specialist, 7 to 12 student support and guidance. She has been in this position for 6 years. In this position, she oversees guidance and counseling, AVID, career technical education, and college and career readiness, particularly for underrepresented college-going students. Previous positions have included high school coprincipal, high school assistant principal, and teacher. She holds an Ed.D. in educational leadership.

Participant 7. Participant 7 holds the position of board member. She has been a board member for 22 years and has served as president of the board six different times. She has a bachelor's degree in elementary education.

Participant 8. Participant 8 holds the position of board member. He has been on the board for 8 years. Previous to his board position, he was a teacher for 27 years and a principal for 13. He holds a master's of arts.

Data Collection

For this study, a purposive sampling approach was used to select the participants. The criteria for participant selection included: (a) current employment in a leadership position in the district, (b) at least 1 year experience in this leadership position, and (c)

responsibility making district-level, strategic decisions about student services and curriculum, particularly for secondary schools.

In terms of participant recruitment, the researcher first contacted the superintendents from each district being examined. Participants were sent a recruitment e-mail invitation to participate in the study, which included the research questions for the study. In addition, the executive assistants for the superintendents were sent an e-mail message and a copy of the recruitment e-mail invitation to forward to the superintendent. Three of the superintendents responded directly or asked their executive assistants to set up the interview date and time. Two of the superintendents did not respond. Of these, one had his or her executive assistant refer the researcher to another contact in the district. The other district did not respond after multiple attempts. As a result, the researcher contacted members of the board to set up interviews. Interviews were scheduled with the participants and the consent form was provided prior to the interview. Six interviews were scheduled. Two of the superintendents also requested to have their assistant superintendents be part of the interview.

Data were collected from the participants using an interview protocol consisting of 10 questions. This protocol was validated by an expert panel consisting of three education professionals, all with experience in research and education. Five of the interviews were conducted via phone and one was conducted via Skype. The interviews were recorded and transcribed. All of the interviewees completed an informed consent prior to the start of the interview that informed them of the research and interview procedures and sought their permission for the recording. Data included the responses collected from each of the interviews.

Data Analysis

The data were analyzed using qualitative content analysis, which “goes beyond merely counting words or extracting objective content from texts to examine meanings, themes, and patterns that may be manifest or latent in a particular text” (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009, p. 1). The following steps were taken: (a) the researcher prepared the data for analysis by having the recordings transcribed and all identifying information removed from the transcripts; (b) the accuracy of the transcriptions were verified by the interview participants; (c) the data were read a minimum of three times by the researcher using bracketing to reduce bias (Creswell, 2007); (d) the data were broken down into manageable sections and meaningful data were highlighted; (e) key themes throughout the transcript were written in the left margin; (f) this process was done for all interview transcripts; (g) the key themes across all transcripts were reviewed to determine the primary themes across all the interviews. A primary theme was a word or phrase that was mentioned by at least 5 (62.5%) of the participants. These were written in the right margins of the transcripts; (h) The coding scheme was tested by using intercoder reliability. Intercoder reliability is a measure of agreement among individuals who are applying codes to text data (Kurasaki, 2000). Interrater reliability was assessed by having a second rater code all the text; and (i) conclusions were drawn from the coded data (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

In the steps above, a second rater was used to ensure reliability and validity of the data analyses. The steps Hyatt (2010) outlined were used to determine interrater reliability:

- The primary researcher first coded the data by reading the transcripts, suspending or bracketing preconceptions about the topic (Creswell, 2007), initially treating all data under investigation as equally important or horizontalization (Sandberg, 2005), and then synthesizing the data by subscribing meaning units to the data in the left margin and conclusions in the right margin.
- The primary researcher trained the additional rater regarding the coding process.
- The primary researcher used a text excerpt to ensure that the rater understood the coding process.
- The rater was given a clean copy of the data for coding.
- The rater read the transcription a minimum of three times—once for initial understanding and familiarity, twice for clarity and understanding, and a third time to analyze the data, applying bracketing for reduction, horizontalization, and synthesis of the data.
- The rater worked with the primary researcher to code one selected transcript.
- Meaning units were placed on the left margin during the coding process while conclusions and structural descriptions were entered in the right margin.
- The rater used the same analysis process for all of the remaining transcripts without the assistance of the primary researcher.
- After analysis, the primary researcher and rater reviewed the conclusions. During the review process, the agreed-upon themes and the areas of discrepancy were tracked.

- Consensus was reached on the conclusions and primary themes. Criteria to determine primary themes were specified. Findings present in 62.5% or more of the participant responses or 5 out of the 8 participants were determined to be primary themes. The results of the analysis are presented in this chapter.

Data Display

All identifying information was removed from the interviews during the transcription process. Each of the 8 participants was assigned a number, 1 through 8, which is used throughout this chapter.

The next section presents the results by research question. Primary themes for each research question are identified and specific examples of participant responses are provided to provide clarification and illustrations for the identified themes.

Results

Research question 1. Research question 1 asked the following: What are the key strategies for providing a safe and supportive learning environment? Two corresponding interview questions were asked in order to explore this question: How do the high schools in your district promote a safe environment? How do the high schools in your district support learning? From these interview questions, seven primary themes emerged: close supervision, alternative pathways, fostering a sense of belonging, safety prevention programs, curriculum aligned K-12, using technology to improve results, and early identification and support of at-risk students. Table 12 presents these primary themes and the participants who identified each theme.

Table 12

Participants Who Identified the Primary Themes Found in Research Question 1

Theme	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Close supervision	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Alternative pathways	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Fostering a sense of belonging	X	X			X	X	X	X
Safety prevention programs	X	X	X		X	X		
Curriculum aligned K-12	X	X	X	X	X			
Using technology to improve results			X	X	X	X		X
Early identification and support of at-risk students	X		X			X	X	X

Close supervision. This theme emerged in all 8 participant responses (100%).

Examples that participants provided of close supervision included the use of on-site security officers, strong partnerships with the local police department, staff supervision throughout campus, controlled exits, student identification badges, and random searches.

Excerpts from participant responses are provided below to demonstrate how close supervision is a strategy for promoting a safe and supportive learning environment.

Participant 2 stated:

Our high school principals take student safety very seriously and their staff are out during passing periods, before school, after school, and lunch time...nothing really helps more than having more eyes out on campus so that students think, “Oh, I see people around all the time so I know that I am safe.”

Participant 7 said:

All of our campuses also have controlled entrances and exits. As students come into an entrance, there is a staff assistant there to check each student. All of our students carry an ID at all times, which have their name, their photo, and I think

they have a bar code so they can check on whether the student gets out early or gets out late. All of these measures have worked together to make a safer campus.

Participant 3 said:

In terms of what we do to promote a safe environment for schools, here in the district, we have an extensive safety officer program. We have many folks on our school sites that monitor. We have our practices, as every district does to make sure that students are able to self-report any situations. We also do provide quite a bit of supervision of students at school sites.

Participant 7 stated:

We work very closely with our police department and up until recently, we had cars going around the neighborhood with one staff member in the district and one police officer to pick up truants. We also have police coverage when students get out in the afternoon. The police department is good about having a car out there so kids know what is going on. Ninety-nine percent of the problems in our district happen outside of school.

Participant 8 said:

The police cooperate with our district by bringing a drug-sniffing dog and we have random searches for drugs and weapons on a regular basis at each one of our campuses.

Alternative pathways. This primary theme emerged in all 8 participant responses (100%). Examples of alternative pathways were different options than the traditional school environment for learning, including online programs, independent study programs, flexible schedule programs, career academies, adult schools, charter schools, credit

recovery programs, or small learning communities. The excerpts below from participants provide more explanation regarding these alternative pathways. Participant 1 stated:

One of the things that I think, as a district, that has really added to us exceeding expectations in terms of the number of dropouts is that we've put a lot of time and energy into providing education options or alternative education as safety nets...some kids are not successful in a traditional school environment and end up dropping out, not coming to school, or failing all of their classes. We have spent a lot more time on bringing kids back in whether it is the freshman academy to tie them into what they are doing in school or alternative programs.

Participant 3 shared:

We have career schools or schools within schools. When freshmen enter, they go right into an academy. It is a smaller school setting to begin with. For example, I think the agricultural academy at one school has about 750 kids. Those kids are taken care of by their academy principal and counselor there. They have their own smaller support system. It creates a smaller, more intimate environment.

Participant 4 stated:

We have a multitude of alternative opportunities for students, including charters, continuation programs, and online programs. That is one of the things that I think makes this district very successful with kids. I think why we do better than many school districts our size and with our demographics are the many alternative programs we offer students. We have many pathways for kids to be successful.

Participant 6 said:

We also have California Partnership Academies and a real focus on career and technical education within the district. All of our comprehensive schools that qualify participate in California Partnership Academy programs....All of our schools definitely have CTE courses and pathways within different CTE industry sectors, which we believe is an excellent way to hook students, keep them motivated, keep them connected with that pipeline, either for transition to certificate programs at the community college level and/or transitioning to 4-year schools and degree programs as well.

Participant 7 said:

We started one [an alternative program] last year and it was for students who are eighth or ninth graders and are not making the grade. It is on an alternative campus. The focus is on making up grades. It is not an independent study program, but it is very similar. They can make their grades up within a semester. We tell students when they go to the alternative campus that their goal is to get back to the regular campus. They can do this by keeping their grades up and making up credits. We also have another program for students who are not succeeding in a traditional environment. It is a smaller learning environment with the same goal as the other alternative program—credit recovery. If students improve their grades and gain credits, they can transition to the regular campus again, provided they are under 18.

Fostering a sense of belonging. This theme emerged in 6 of the 8 participant responses (75%). Examples of how school districts fostered a sense of belonging

included providing a wide array of clubs, programs, and activities; providing mentors to incoming students; creating a personalized learning environment; and having students enroll in small learning communities. The excerpts below exemplify this theme.

Participant 1 said:

The other major thing that I think has greatly affected the environment is that we really emphasize across our district the importance of kids being connected to school and adults making sure that everyone has a sense of significance and belonging. I know that you think right away, “Well, what does that have to do with safety?” However, creating a safe environment really starts with getting students involved and showing them that we are concerned about them being at school and how they connect with each other and respect each other. We have done many things over the past 5 years to help students feel significant and that they belong.... We have posters around campus with an iceberg to remind students and staff that when we see people you only see the tip of the iceberg and many things go on underneath.... Another one that started about the same time is Link Crew. In this program, a group of older students welcomes and connects to freshmen.

Participant 6 stated:

We also strongly encourage students to connect with after school activities and different clubs and school spirit motivational activities. The very compelling belief that we have as a district is that students must feel connected with their peers and with school activities outside of just academics.

Participant 7 shared:

We have instituted what we call the male academy and the female academy. Students who are having a little trouble are part of these academies. They receive mentoring, have special shirts, and are there to provide leadership to the school. By giving these students some mentoring and role modeling, we turn around what may be considered would-be troublemakers into successful leaders on the campus. The female academy started last year, but the male academy has been there for a couple of years.

Participant 8 reported:

What we have gone to over the course of the last 5 years on all but one campus is an approach to small learning communities. Quite frequently, they are themed so students are tied in with a small group of faculty members and a counselor so that we can more closely personalize the environment and help kids succeed.

Safety prevention programs. This theme emerged in 5 of the 8 participant responses (62.5%). Descriptors of this theme include training programs for staff, grants to support safety programs, mediation programs, and educational programs for students. The following excerpts provide examples of how this theme is operationalized.

Participant 1 stated:

An incident happened in the past that was racially motivated. Because of this incident, we have had a lot of training, maybe earlier than some districts, on making sure that we pay attention to harassment and bullying, especially when it is any of the protected classes. So rather than just tackle sexual orientation or race, we really focused on tolerance of differences. One program was called Breaking

Down the Walls. These programs emphasized with our students and staff the need to get along with each other and respect each other.

Participant 3 reported:

The district received a Safe and Supportive Schools Grant through California, through CDE [California Department of Education]....Through the grant, we are going to fund a peer counselor program, a psychology class, a peer advocates program, and really expand our Link Crew, which assigns upper classmen to be mentors at our freshmen orientation. What this high school in particular is going to do is they are going to look at the students that are really struggling at the eighth grade level and mentor those students. They will find upperclassmen, juniors and seniors, to try to connect with them in terms of trying to engage them on the school campus as much as they can. They are also going to do Breaking Down the Walls, which is a program focused on more peer-to-peer discussion about bullying and other safety issues.

Participant 5 said:

We have worked to put things in a systematic way through our middle and high schools. We first started with a unity forum where kids talk together about issues and get to know each other on a different level. This has grown to a program where peer leaders unite students so they can talk about compassion and respect. This is really having an impact on our kids. From there it has grown into a peer mediation program. We have peer mediation in three of the four high schools and a couple of the middle schools.

Participant 6 said:

We also have definitely promoted different tolerance education programs. We have multicultural councils and clubs at just about every school in our district. We also, of course, provide antibullying programs for all students, and all students and teachers are provided antibullying training. We also clearly spell out antibullying procedures, which are described in the parent student handbooks. Pupil services, another division in our district, addresses antibullying behaviors such as bullying behaviors in social media for example, and they have really stepped up their efforts to communicate with students at each of the school sites about appropriate behaviors and consequences for bullying activities.

Curriculum aligned K-12. This theme emerged in 5 of the 8 participant responses (62.5%) in response to what strategies the district implements to create a supportive learning environment. Descriptors of this theme include district-wide aligned goals and strategies, a tight instructional framework, clear district goals and targets, and articulation of alignment and goals. The excerpts below elaborate on this theme. Participant 2 stated:

We are a K-12 or a K through adult school district. Sometimes people frown upon unified school districts because they are so large. We have 27,000 students. However, I think in terms of learning goals, our learning goals are K-12 learning goals, so that students who are here for a significant amount of time in our district, they know what to expect when they leave sixth grade because they're going to a middle school in the district that they've been planning to go to ever since they got into kindergarten. When they leave eighth grade and middle school, they go to a high school that is the feeder high school that they have always

known that is where they were going to go. Therefore, there is consistency. It does not mean that everybody achieves to the same high rate, but there is consistency regarding school goals, what the district goals are, and as Participant 1 mentioned, we do significant amount of interventions to make sure that everybody can do the best they can in a comprehensive setting.

Participant 1 said:

We've spent a lot of time aligning not only our curriculum and expectations, but even our teaching strategies across our district so that in our best teacher's classroom, or what some might say is our worst teacher's or worst school's classroom, there's going to be similarities in what we expect and how it is taught. As a parent, you could walk in and say, "Oh look, they're doing the same instructional unit this month. And look they have kids interact together in a similar way."

Participant 3 shared:

We have a very tight instructional framework here in our district that was framed up about 3 years ago. This really frames what we do as a district in support of learning. I think you can talk to most districts in California and across the country and see that they are going to be doing the same thing. We use many common formative assessments and we have aligned vertically and horizontally our entire curriculum. We have PLCs [professional learning communities] that are targeted and meet to discuss kids. We use data. We have a ton of data on the students and we move students when needed. We provide a tremendous amount of intervention programs for our students to make sure that they are able to get to where they

need to be, so it is a very tight system in terms of instruction. We are a unified district, so we need to make sure that we are meeting the needs of all kids all the way K-12. We are K-12 system, so we have a very tight instructional framework all the way through that includes a strong assessment system, a very strong intervention system, and clear expectations throughout. Our curriculum is very aligned and articulated.

Participant 4 stated:

As for instruction, the last 2 years we have been working on developing professional learning communities. This approach honors the classroom teacher as a professional and a decision maker and it tries to make sure teachers have a very clear understanding of goals and targets. With clear goals and targets, they can make the right decisions at the classroom level and teach the kids what they need to know. With the PLCs [professional learning communities], they also form data teams.

Using technology to improve results. This theme emerged in 5 of the 8 participant responses (62.5%). Descriptors of this theme include the use of online assessments to improve instruction, using technology to monitor student progress, and enhanced communication with parents via technology. The excerpts below provide specific examples of how technology is used to support learning. Participant 3 stated:

We track students very well. We know exactly where students are at based off their formative and summative assessments that we provide throughout the school year, even at the high school level. We are able to move kids when needed to ensure we are meeting their needs.

Participant 4 said:

The results of online assessments are available to teachers the day after their class finishes the assessments. Currently, we have assessments for math and language arts. Overall, teachers have three sets of data. They are able to see what students know or what level they are at, what level they should be at, and what the next milestone should be. This helps the teachers group the kids so they can provide instruction at the appropriate level. It gives them information regarding the areas that need to be addressed in more depth by the teacher.

Participant 6 said:

Lastly, we have a very strong technology integration component in our district. While we do have programs like Nova Net and some of the more typical credit recovery programs, we also have some unique innovative programs in our schools. For example, one of our high schools has a program where every student at the school, Grades 9 to 12, has a mobile device, a netbook, where all of their books are stored. Teachers are able to use the various links and resources that are available to support instruction using technology.... We have seen that once you put that technology in the hands of students, that it energizes both students and teachers and really provides a completely different platform for students to feel connected and excited about what they are learning.

Participant 8 stated:

We also have what we call school loop. Any parent who has a computer in his or her home or wishes to go to a library to use one can call up his son or daughter's high school program and check to see what the homework assignment is that

night, what their current grade is, and what the expectation is on a day-to-day basis. This is a fabulous technological approach to bringing parents in the loop so a kid cannot come home and say I do not have any homework tonight.

Early identification and support for at-risk students. The final theme that emerged in 5 of the 8 participant responses (62.5%) was early identification and support for at-risk students. Examples of this strategy participants shared included identifying students at-risk of dropping out early, providing early intervention for struggling students, and a focus on helping students who are falling behind to catch up with their peers. The excerpts below elaborate on this theme. Participant 6 said:

We certainly have honed our ability to identify students at risk early in order to provide them with different support strategies, such as our Read 180 program. We also have a strategic math and English program that is a double-block period with some unique strategies to support their regular math and English courses. We have interventions at many different levels.

Participant 8 stated:

We have a team of five counselors that are divided up into five geographical areas. For kids who begin to develop a pattern of missing a lot of school, these counselors make personal home calls and visit with the parents or the guardians, whatever the significant adult is, and work to get those young people back into school and back on the success track.

Participant 3 said:

We put a lot of work into the School Attendance Review Board. It is a process that we tweaked in the past 3 or 4 years to make it a lot better. It is a process

where if the student does not show up, we have a parent meeting. We bring them in. We try to find out what is going on with the family and why the student is not coming to school. We see how we can support the family.

Participant 1 stated:

We have tried to set up a whole network of other opportunities to pick up kids that otherwise might have been dropouts. We have a pretty involved, and it's grown over the last I would say 6 or 8 years, independent study school that is not your traditional classroom environment. It is really a hybrid school environment where students have to spend 8 hours during the day attending science or math classes, but a lot of the work is independent. Kids that have trouble with being at class every day at 8:30 and going to 6 periods one after another have been successful in this flexible schedule program. We have approximately 400 kids attend now and the school's graduation rate has continued to increase.

Research question 2. The second research question asked: What are the key strategies for developing a culture of high expectations for all students? The corresponding interview question aligned with this question was: How do the high schools in your district create high expectations for students? From this question, three primary themes emerged: shared accountability, focus on individual student progress, and rigorous curriculum. Table 13 shows the participants who identified each theme.

Table 13

Participants Who Identified the Primary Themes Found in Research Question 2

Theme	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Shared accountability	X			X	X	X	X	
Focus on individual student progress	X		X	X	X		X	X
Rigorous curriculum	X		X	X	X	X		

Shared accountability. The first theme that emerged in 5 of the 8 participant responses (62.5%) was shared accountability and monitoring. Descriptors of this theme include strong accountability, shared goals, consistent monitoring of performance across classrooms, strong professional learning communities, and district-level priorities focused on achievement for all. The excerpts below elaborate on this theme. Participant 4 stated:

In addition to managing the school, our principals must be instructional leaders. In our leadership meetings, we combine training with professional dialogue about how instruction is going and how it can be improved. This dialogue holds everyone accountable for instruction and moves the entire district forward.

Participant 6 said:

From the top down, our school board sets what the goals will be and so we have a very clear pyramid of priorities that the school board has defined. These priorities are focused on academics and achievement for all.

Participant 1 stated:

I think that it is very important for a system our size to have clear alignment. When people like me stand up and say something, it needs to be based in reality. The only way that this happens is if we are aligned and if we have accountability to each other for doing what we say we will do. I do not mean that in a negative sense, but if you set common goals, then you get to focus on how the system can then support these goals. We have developed programs to facilitate common goal setting.

Participant 7 said:

We also encourage a lot of discussion among the teachers and in some cases the schools have been able to have common periods where the teachers can go over what they're doing with the students to share best practices.

Focus on individual student progress. The second theme that emerged in 6 of the 8 participant responses (75%) was a focus on individual student progress. Descriptors of this theme include setting student level goals, tracking students, and personalizing instruction. The excerpts below operationalize this theme. Participant 1 stated:

I think accountability in our system has come to a point where our students expect, and we expect our students, to achieve higher and to improve. These expectations, looking at data on a more regular basis, and really establishing clear goals for achievement for our schools and our teachers has helped our district move towards a no failures allowed approach. When a student does not achieve, we do not give up. We try again. I think this type of culture has led to higher expectations.... We have continued to evolve what our goals are as a district to make sure that every student improves on our state test and has a goal, every single student, whether you are at grade level or above grade level.

Participant 5 said:

A change that I have seen is a focus on individual students. We have become more sophisticated to measure individual student progress. This has also reinforced the concept of RTI, Response to Intervention. How do the kids respond to our interventions? If it does not work well, then we need to change the intervention.

Participant 7 stated:

We can track all of our students within our district. We know where they are.

Because we can track them, we really know what our graduation rate is and what our dropout rate is.

Participant 3 stated:

We track students very well. We know exactly where students are at based off their formative and summative assessments that we provide throughout the school year, even at the high school level. We are able to move kids when needed to ensure we are meeting their needs.

Rigorous curriculum. The third theme that emerged in 5 of the 8 participant responses (62.5%) was a focus on rigorous curriculum. Examples of this include using rigorously designed programs, mapping curriculum, incorporating common core standards, and rigorous program design. Participant 3 stated:

I think this [creating a culture of high expectations] begins with making sure our curriculum is articulated. The curriculum is mapped backward starting from the college level. We start with what do students need in order to be successful when they leave us. One of the things that we continue to work on is our level of rigor.

Participant 4 said:

The formative assessments and the new math and language arts programs are strategies that we are implementing to strengthen our curriculum and support learning despite large class sizes.... We are very focused on rigorous curriculum design. We have a group coming in and working us. With the group's help, we are looking at the new common core standards and analyzing them using Bloom's

Taxonomy. We then match the standards to instructional strategies and determine how to best assess progress for each standard....In regards to setting high expectations, when you start talking about and focusing in on achievement and where the targets are, the kids rise to the occasion.

Participant 1 stated:

[With the shift to common core standards], we will be replacing, and upgrading in some cases, what we expect kids to know and be able to do. In my review of common core, the standards are more rigorous in that they expect higher-order thinking skills. We are moving towards common core standards and assessments.

Research question 3. The third research question asked: What are the key strategies for ensuring effective leadership at all levels? The corresponding interview question was: How do the high schools in your district ensure effective leadership at all levels? From this question, two primary themes emerged: (a) leadership development, and (b) collaboration and sharing of best practices. Table 14 shows the participants who identified each theme.

Table 14

Participants Who Identified the Primary Themes Found in Research Question 3

Theme	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Leadership development	X	X	X		X	X	X	X
Collaboration and sharing of best practices	X		X		X	X	X	X

Leadership development. When asked how the high schools in the district ensure effective leadership at all levels, a theme that emerged in 7 of the 8 participant responses (87.5%) was leadership development. Examples of leadership development participants shared include professional development, leadership academies, identification of new

talent, mentoring, and providing opportunities to lead. The excerpts below elaborate on this theme. Participant 2 stated:

We have spent a significant amount of money on professional development in the last 5 years. This professional development has more consistently focused on learning and student achievement. It has helped our teachers become more consistent in their expectations for the achievement of all their students.

Participant 1 said:

There certainly has been a greater emphasis on our part in making sure that principals are with us and are committed to student achievement and district goals....That is important because you have to have commitment at that level. We very much expect principals to work with their administrative team and their leadership team in a broader sense....We've committed to ongoing district leadership by bringing together middle school and high school leadership teams four or five times a year to really emphasize training in the strategies we expect to see, how we align as a district, and setting educational goals. This helps infuse throughout our system capacity building....Also, one of the things that we have shifted concerning leadership, whether it is coadministrators or principals, is being very, very knowledgeable with our instructional strategies.

Participant 2 shared:

We run five coadministrator institutes. They are only an hour and a half, 4 to 5:30, on afternoons. The focus of these institutes is to continue to work with all those folks who are not principals yet, but work with principals, in trying to help them also carry along the mission not only of their school, but also of the district.

Participant 6 stated:

I would say in this district that there are very clear expectations of all of our managers and school leaders in terms of assuming the responsibility and the motivation for providing effective leadership at the site and district level. I think that there also is a very strong commitment to build capacity in this district, more than I have seen in other districts, where potential leadership is encouraged and natural leaders are encouraged to take on different site-level leadership roles and then also to bring them onto district-level teams.

Collaboration and sharing of best practices. The second theme that emerged for this research question in 6 of the 8 participant responses (75%) was collaboration and sharing of best practices. Examples of this theme include collaboration within schools, across schools, and across districts; collaborative meetings and teams; and formal sharing of best practices. The excerpts below provide more detailed examples. Participant 2 stated:

I was a high school principal, and while the other principals were my friends, I did not do an awful lot of collaboration at that time. Now, principals visit each other's schools. They go into each other's classrooms.

Participant 1 shared:

We actually have a common visitation protocol among the four high school principals. They visit each other's schools generally after we receive the state testing results. They take 4 days, parts of 4 days, and visit each of the high schools and walk through as many classes as possible in a team that includes the

assistant principal, district leadership, and in some cases teachers. This is really to get a sense of actual implementation of common strategies.

Participant 5 said:

The principals meet monthly as a leadership academy, all principals throughout the district. Over time, these meetings have evolved. In our last leadership meeting, we talked about how we can take what we are doing to the next level. We went through a process of reflection and sharing. The principals broke up into different levels. All the high school principals were together for example. They discussed strategies for how to deal with specific issues and problems at each of their levels.

Participant 7 stated:

If there is a teacher or a principal who shows excellence in a certain practice, then principals or teachers will be released to go and shadow that person and learn from them.

Research question 4. The fourth research question was: What are the key strategies for data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance? In order to explore this research question, two corresponding interview questions were asked: How do the high schools in your district use data for decision making? How do the high schools in your district monitor student performance? Two primary themes emerged: common and frequent assessments and data-driven instruction. Table 15 shows the participants who identified each theme.

Table 15

Participants Who Identified the Primary Themes Found in Research Question 4

Theme	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Common assessments	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X
Data-driven instruction			X	X	X		X	X

Common assessments. The first theme that emerged for this research question in all 8 participant responses (100%) was common assessments. Descriptors given for this theme include common benchmarks, formative assessments, summative assessments, and frequent monitoring. The excerpts below provide more detailed examples. Participant 8 stated:

We are a data-driven district and we really place a lot of stock in this. For example, at our high schools, particularly in math, science, and language arts, there are common unit exams, quarter exams, and final exams that are shared across departments. Therefore, the departments can collaborate on a regular basis and determine the interventions that they think are necessary to get the kids to succeed.

Participant 1 said:

We really try to emphasize that departments or grade levels work together to have agreed upon common assessments so that they have ways to monitor progress and to assess and know if kids are getting what they want them to know.... We have end of semester common assessments in all of our high school core subject areas.

Participant 2 stated:

Our biggest strategy for monitoring student performance is common assessments. We have curriculum maps on all of our core classes.... It is a good feeling to know

that people are working on common benchmarks and that they are using common curriculum maps.

Data-driven instruction. The other theme that emerged for this research question was data-driven instruction. This theme was present in 5 of the 8 participant responses (62.5%). Phrases used to describe this theme include intentionality with data, using data to improve performance, data drive instruction, and setting individual targets using data. The excerpts below provide more clarity regarding this theme. Participant 4 said:

The program [we use] provides formative assessments. For example, if you are in the third grade, you start out with third-grade questions. If you start getting them wrong, the questions get easier until it gets to your instructional level...If you are at third grade and you are getting them all right, then the questions get harder until it finds your instructional level. We will know if a third grader is performing at kindergarten level or at ninth-grade level. The results of the online assessments are available to teachers the day after their class finishes the assessments.

Participant 7 stated:

Teachers are trained on how to use data and are doing so to write curriculum and improve instruction. We look at data all the time and we use it as a way of identifying where we need to improve a little bit.

Participant 8 said:

This year the math department worked together to administer a unit exam. They used the results of the exam to reshuffle kids into appropriate groups and classes according to the concepts they were struggling to understand. The teachers were

then able to provide more direct instruction to these groups and to reteach certain concepts.

Participant 5 stated:

We have developed data teams. In the data team process, we start with teacher training....The idea of training them on the data team process is to help them become intentional about data....In these data teams, they have a process where they look at the scores of the kids. They do a pretest or a formative assessment focused on a specific standard. They try different teaching strategies. The teachers try to choose the exact same strategy so that they can see if that strategy is the best strategy for that standard. They then do a posttest and come back together to talk about what worked and what did not work....They look at each individual student and come up with strategies to reteach the kids who did not get it. Data teams have really made a difference. It has made everybody stop, reflect on teaching strategies, and analyze how each individual student is performing.

Research question 5. The fifth research question asked: What are the key strategies for ensuring strong collaboration between teachers and administrators? One corresponding interview question asked: How do the high schools in your district promote collaboration between teachers and administrators? Overall, two primary themes emerged from participant responses: focused collaboration and professional learning communities. Table 16 shows the participants who identified each theme.

Table 16

Participants Who Identified the Primary Themes Found in Research Question 5

Theme	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Focused collaboration	X		X			X	X	X
Professional learning communities	X	X		X	X	X		

Focused collaboration. One theme that emerged for this research question was focused collaboration. This theme was present in 5 of the 8 participant responses (62.5%). Examples of focused collaboration included department meeting, release times, common prep and planning time, and best practice sharing. The excerpts below provide more clarity regarding this theme. Participant 1 stated:

The leadership piece really is helping staff know that they are not in this alone and that they do not have to do it independently. That is getting away from the attitude that I can go into my room and do whatever I want. As a superintendent, I stand up in front of the teachers now and I say, “That’s not the way it is anymore. You cannot just do what you want because it is not about you. It is about kids. You have to work with your grade-level teachers or your departments on what you are going to teach, what you want kids to learn, when you want them to learn it, and how you will know they have learned it. If they did not learn it, you have to discuss what you are going to do about it. We have been very focused on developing this kind of collaboration.

Participant 5 shared:

In regards to leadership, most of our principals are really connected to the teachers. They are very involved in the data teams. They walk from team to team and listen. Sometimes they offer ideas or ask questions. They guide the teams.

Participant 7 stated:

We allow teachers to be released to go watch another teacher and find out different methods. In addition, the superintendent has regular meetings with each level. He will have a group of teachers come in with the representative of their school to discuss what they need to be successful.

Participant 3 said:

With the School-Within-a-School model it is ensuring that we have common prep and planning time. The program also works off a master schedule to ensure that there is plenty of time available for students and teachers....Something that the schools really want to explore is making sure that there is a common intervention time to meet with students.

Professional learning communities. The other theme that emerged for this research question was the use of professional learning communities. This theme was present in 5 of the 8 participant responses (62.5%). The excerpts below provide more clarity regarding the use of professional learning communities to promote collaboration.

For example, Participant 1 shared:

One of our major initiatives is focused collaboration around student achievement. Today you have heard about professional learning communities and how we are using them as a strategy to facilitate collaboration....We put a lot of emphasis on organizing our schedules to do prep release time around teams of teachers at some of our schools so that they can collaborate.

Participant 6 said:

We do have a lot of emphasis on site-based planning. In that regard, we do have regular staff meetings at all of our sites, department meetings, and PLCs [professional learning communities] meet regularly. We have early release days every other week for PLCs [professional learning communities] to meet regularly.

Participant 1 said:

Over the last 2 years in particular, I have worked with our union leadership, our teacher association president, and vice president on almost a monthly basis...the reason I bring it up here is it has been all about teacher leadership. They are very interested in us continuing down the pathway of empowering teacher leaders and collaboration. They see PLCs [professional learning communities] as a way to empower teachers to give them more control over their destiny and their environment.

Participant 4 shared:

There is also a lot of collaboration with middle school principals and their staff. They also all have leadership teams. Like in the high schools, you will have your core subject areas that will all be on a leadership team. Each school has a school data team [that is part of the professional learning community]. Both teachers and principals analyze data together at the school site.

Research question 6. The sixth and final research question that was explored in the study was: What are the key strategies for maintaining high levels of parent and community support and engagement? Two corresponding interview questions were asked in order to explore this research question: How do the high schools in your district

develop and maintain parent support? How do the high schools in your district develop and maintain high levels of community support? From participant responses, three primary themes emerged: (a) connecting parents to school, (b) strong collaboration between school and community, and (c) transparency. Table 17 shows the participants who identified each theme.

Table 17

Participants Who Identified the Primary Themes Found in Research Question 6

Theme	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Connecting parents to school		X	X	X		X	X	X
Strong collaboration between school and community	X		X	X		X	X	X
Transparency	X	X	X				X	X

Connecting parents to school. In response to the interview questions, how do the high schools in your district develop and maintain parent support and how do the high schools in your district develop and maintain high levels of community support, the first theme that emerged was connecting parents to school. This theme was present in 6 of the 8 participant responses (75%). Examples of this theme include PTAs, booster groups, site-based councils, advisory groups, connecting parents through technology, volunteer programs, and targeted communication. The excerpts below elaborate more on this theme. For example, Participant 2 shared:

The strategies we use are traditional in some ways, but out of the box in others. In California, we have school site councils. Those are the governing board of a site that is made up of administrators, teachers, parents, and students. Historically at our comprehensive sites, those are 16-member councils and they meet monthly and approve any dollars that are spent at a site. This is a way that we keep parents

involved from a governance model. There are also PTSAs at all of our sites. We have English learner advisory committees because we have a significant population here that is considered English learners. Therefore, those parents come and those meetings are typically monthly or bimonthly. We have cocurriculum booster groups.

Participant 3 stated:

We do have many parent groups that are strong advocates for their kids that are not English speaking.... We have strong site councils here. Every school has a very strong site council. It has parent leaders.

Participant 4 said:

We have had trainings for parents and community members at our schools such as recent gang awareness training. We are trying to engage parents and share with them the needs of the district so they can spread this information. PTA is a very important piece in what we are doing. It helps us communicate. It helps us link our parents to the school.... We also have a program called Parent Link. This program is a mass communication system, which currently includes automated phone messaging and will be, in the coming year, a portal for parents to access information, via their smartphones, regarding their kids' grades or behavior. They also can text or e-mail their teachers. Teachers can use Parent Link to post lesson plans so parents stay in the loop regarding their child's instruction.

Participant 6 stated:

Our district uses technology to try to increase communication between school and home. We have an online system that allows any student or parent to log onto the

district system to see their child's attendance and grades. We have another program called Parent Direct, which allows us to send out e-mail communications to any family that provides their e-mail address. Again, we have a parent portal, which parents can log onto to see curriculum and events at the school so that they know that there's a place that they can go to find out information not just about their own child, but also about opportunities at the school for them to get more involved.

Participant 7 stated:

The other thing that our superintendent does about every 6 weeks is hold a parent forum. He rotates where the forum is held. It is usually held in a school in the district. There is one in the morning and one at night. In the morning, there may be 50 or 60 parents there, which is just incredible. In the evening, a little fewer will be there, but he will go over the same agenda both morning and evening so he is getting input from parents. This is another way we communicate with parents.... We are always thinking how can we communicate better and how can we get our parents involved because that is the key to success with our kids.

Strong collaboration between school and community. The second theme that emerged for this research question was strong collaboration between school and community. This theme was present in 6 of the 8 participant responses (75%). Examples of this theme include principals involved in community groups, strong business partners with schools, and school-community events. The excerpts below elaborate more on this theme. For example, Participant 6 shared:

Concerning community support, our superintendent has convened another group called the community advisory group. This group meets once a month and includes different business and community partners. As I mentioned earlier, they discuss things that are happening in the district, concerns in the community, and how the community and school district can collaborate to further our common goals.

Participant 7 said:

For a number of years, we have what is called principal for a day. Business leaders in the community fight to be assigned a principal for a day at one of our high schools. We have so many interested that we usually have three or four at each school following the principal around.... We have an education foundation so people will donate money and it goes to that. They support the principal for a day program so no general funds are used for any of this. It is a big deal in the community. In the morning, everybody meets and goes out to their schools. They come back and have a debriefing in the afternoon. It is a very positive way of involving the community.

Participant 1 said:

We continue to have community support because people know what we are doing. I go to approximately 15 community group meetings, mostly service groups, and our district council PTA to give what I call the state of the district report every fall. In this report, I share data on what we think is important, including how our students are doing in achievement scores, our scores for our schools, our scores for our district, how many kids are involved in middle school, and how many kids

are involved in activities, including athletics and the performing arts. I report all these things in order to give an overview of our district and show how we are improving every year.

Participant 3 stated:

We maintain strong community support through the advisory councils because every career technical education program has a community advisory program.

These advisory councils have regular meetings.

Participant 4 said:

Getting the community linked to the school is a very important piece of what we do and will continue to be so.

Transparency. The last theme that emerged for research question 6 was transparency. This theme was present in 5 of the 8 participant responses (62.5%). The excerpts below provide more detail on this theme. Participant 1 shared:

One of the things that we expect our high school principals to do is to be important people in the community....We spend a lot of our time talking and being out there in the community. As the district leader, I very much try to highlight the district both in print, board meetings, at community groups, and in the newspaper....I take my job very seriously and so do board members. We have to promote the district. As a district, we need to share what most kids are doing rather than what few kids are doing.

Participant 3 said:

I have monthly community listening sessions. I spread those out across our campuses. Every month I will go out and do a program with our community. I

speak at service clubs. These listening sessions provide a great opportunity to hear what the community has to say. This is the 1st year we have done it. The sessions have been well received by our community. I do them in Spanish and English.

Participant 7 stated:

A long, long time ago, we decided that the community needed to know what we are doing in the district because we are providing their future workforce. We work closely with the chamber of commerce. We work with all the business groups within the community.

Participant 8 said:

One thing too, speaking of leadership, is that our superintendent has monthly forums: one in the morning and one in the early evening. He rotates these through the district at different school sites so the parents and the public can come and ask questions. He is very accessible to the public.

Summary

This study collected qualitative data through interviews with leaders of five school districts that have the distinction of being identified as districts that are defying expectations regarding high school graduation (Diplomas Count, 2010). Overall, 8 leaders were interviewed. These interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours in length. Nine questions tied to the six research questions were asked of all participants. One additional question was asked to see if there was anything else that the interviewees would like to add given the focus of the interview. All interviews were recorded, transcribed, and verified for accuracy by the participants. The primary researcher conducted content analysis and a second rater checked for reliability. The steps Hyatt

(2010) outlined were used to determine interrater reliability. Through the analysis process, the raters agreed upon and identified primary themes. Criteria to determine primary themes were specified. Findings present in 62.5% or more of the participant responses, or 5 out of the 8 participants, were determined to be primary themes. In this chapter, primary themes per research question were outlined in tables and interview excerpts were provided to elaborate on these themes.

For research question 1—What are the key strategies for promoting a safe and supportive learning environment—and its two corresponding interviews questions—How do the high schools in your district promote a safe environment? How do the high schools in your district support learning?—seven primary themes emerged: close supervision, alternative pathways, fostering a sense of belonging, safety prevention programs, curriculum aligned K-12, using technology to improve results, and early identification and support for at-risk students.

Three primary themes emerged for research question 2—What are the key strategies for developing a culture of high expectations for all students?—and its corresponding interview question—How do the high schools in your district create high expectations for students? These themes included shared accountability, focus on individual student progress, and rigorous curriculum.

For research question 3—What are the key strategies for ensuring effective leadership at all levels?—two primary themes emerged. The corresponding interview question was how do the high schools in your district ensure effective leadership at all levels? The two primary themes that emerged were: (a) leadership development, and (b) collaboration and sharing of best practices.

For the fourth research question—What are the key strategies for data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance?—and its two corresponding research questions—How do the high schools in your district use data for decision making? How do the high schools in your district monitor student performance?—two primary themes emerged: common assessments and data-driven instruction.

The fifth research question—What are the key strategies for ensuring strong collaboration between teachers and administrators?—had one corresponding interview question—How do the high schools in your district promote collaboration between teachers and administrators? Two primary themes emerged for this research question: focused collaboration and professional learning communities.

For the last research question—What are the key strategies for maintaining high levels of parent and community support and engagement?—and its two corresponding interviews questions—How do the high schools in your district develop and maintain parent support? How do the high schools in your district development and maintain high levels of community support?—three primary themes emerged: (a) connecting parents to school, (b) strong collaboration between school and community, and (c) transparency.

Participants were also asked at the end of the interview if they had anything else they would like to add. No new themes emerged during this portion of the interview. The majority of respondents just elaborated further on previous statements or did not provide anything further.

Chapter 5: Conclusions and Recommendations

A total of 1.3 million students do not graduate on time every year; approximately 13 million students each decade (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). High school dropout has a negative impact on society and the individuals who are dropping out of school (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006a, 2006b). Numerous studies have been conducted during the past decade to identify the risk factors associated with students dropping out of school, including student, social, and school factors (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Berzin, 2010; Bridgeland et al., 2006; Cappella & Weinstein, 2001; Christle et al., 2007; Dalton et al., 2009; Griffin, 2002; Lessard et al., 2008; MacIver, 2011; Meeker et al., 2009; Neild et al., 2007; Newcomb et al., 2002; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006; Suh & Suh, 2007).

The purpose of this study was to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that were exceeding expected graduation rates (Diplomas Count, 2010). According to the Editorial Projects in Education (EPE) Research Center, these five school districts are exceeding expectations based on their district size, poverty level, socioeconomic makeup, and spending patterns. Notably, these districts are defying expectations in a region and state that is consistently producing a high number of dropouts in the United States. Understanding the key strategies that are contributing to their success could potentially identify strategies that can be replicated in other schools and districts across the state or country.

In order to focus the research on the most relevant issues, a review of the literature was conducted to identify key priorities of high performing schools. These

priorities served as the conceptual framework for the current study and helped guide the research and interview questions.

Organization of the Chapter

This chapter begins with a summary of the key components of the study, including background information on the issue, the research questions, and an overview of the methods. The findings and conclusions are then presented by research question, with excerpts from collected data to substantiate findings. The chapter ends with implications for the field and recommendations for future research.

Background

The need for a high school diploma as a minimum has become imperative in order to obtain employment in this increasingly complex economy; yet every school day approximately 6,500 students drop out of high school (Diplomas Count, 2011). The dropout rate among minority students and students from economically disadvantaged backgrounds is disproportionately higher than their peers (Diplomas Count, 2010; Zvoch, 2006).

Empirical research has demonstrated a correlation between high school dropout and several factors. These factors primarily fall under the following categories: (a) student factors (i.e., academic achievement, absenteeism, and behavioral problems), (b) social factors (i.e., poverty and lower levels of parental involvement), and (c) school factors (i.e., school organization and school climate; Hess & Copeland, 2001).

High school dropout has a significant impact on the individuals dropping out of high school and society at large. Individuals who drop out are more likely to be unemployed, receive lower wages if employed (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008;

Campolieti et al., 2010; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009), and have poorer psychological functioning as adults, particularly among females (Kaplan & Damphousse, 1996). Additionally, the number of high school dropouts has a significant impact on the economy. Throughout the course of a student's lifetime, a high school dropout earns, on average, about \$260,000 less than a high school graduate (Levin, 2005) and contributes about \$60,000 less in taxes (Rouse, 2005).

In order to address this issue, federal and state policymakers, school districts, and educators have implemented a number of strategies. At the policy level, laws have been enacted to encourage students to stay in school and many states have adopted common core standards in order to standardize learning expectations across districts and states. At the state and school-district level, interventions have included the development of data tracking systems, the use of early warning systems, enhanced professional development, parent engagement strategies, a focus on feeder middle schools, and targeted interventions at key transition years (Balfanz et al., 2010). A few studies also have been conducted to understand what makes high-performing schools effective. The present study completed an extensive literature review and uncovered six priorities of high-performing schools: (a) providing students with a safe and supportive learning environment (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), (b) developing a culture of high expectations for all students (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), (c) ensuring effective leadership at all levels (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), (d) data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), (e) strong collaboration between teachers

and administrators (Daggett, 2005; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006), and (f) high levels of parent and community support and engagement (Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006). These priorities served as the conceptual framework for the present study. The current study explored how these priorities are operationalized in five school districts in California that are showing promising results in terms of graduation rates (Diplomas Count, 2010).

Study Purpose and Research Questions

The purpose of this study was to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that were exceeding expected graduation rates (Diplomas Count, 2010). In a 2010 report in *Education Week*, 21 urban school districts were identified by the EPE Research Center as school districts that are defying expectations based on their size, student to teacher ratios, racial-ethnic diversity, socioeconomic breakdown, and spending patterns (Diplomas Count, 2010; Swanson, 2010). According to the EPE Research Center, these school districts are posting graduation rates at least 10 percentage points, some close to 20%, higher than what is expected for schools with similar characteristics. Of the 21 urban school districts, five from California were examined in this study (Diplomas Count, 2010).

The research questions for the study were developed based on a thorough review of the literature of the key priorities of high-performing school districts. These priorities served as the conceptual framework for this study and were used in the development of the following research questions:

1. What are the key strategies for providing a safe and supportive learning environment?
2. What are the key strategies for developing a culture of high expectations for all students?
3. What are the key strategies for ensuring effective leadership at all levels?
4. What are the key strategies for data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance?
5. What are the key strategies for ensuring strong collaboration between teachers and administrators?
6. What are the key strategies for maintaining high levels of parent and community support and engagement?

Overview of Methods

Data collection. A qualitative research approach was utilized to explore the strategies being implemented in the five school districts examined. According to Bloomberg and Volpe (2008), qualitative research promotes a deep understanding of an issue and emphasizes exploration, discovery, and description. The use of a qualitative approach for this study was particularly useful because the goal was to understand from the perspective of a leader in the district why they have been successful despite the presence of environmental factors that have been known to impede progress. This type of detailed information cannot be easily obtained through a quantitative survey.

Furthermore, the majority of studies that have been conducted to understand key strategies of high-performing schools to date have utilized a quantitative approach. The

goal of this study was to follow-up on these quantitative studies in order to gain more insight.

In order to explore the research question in the present study, interviews were conducted with leaders in each of the identified districts. In each district, at least one leader was interviewed. In some of the districts, two individuals were interviewed as a result of recommendations from the superintendent or other district leaders. Overall, 8 participants who met the criteria of serving as superintendent, assistant superintendent, board member, or district-level instructional leader were interviewed by phone or via Skype. The interviews ranged from 45 minutes to 2 hours in length. Nine interview questions that tie to the research questions were developed. In order to establish content validity of the interview questions, a panel of three experts, knowledgeable in research and education, were asked to review the protocol and assess whether the questions would yield data that is relevant to the research questions. The questions were revised accordingly. The interviews were recorded and transcribed with the consent of participants. The participants verified the accuracy of the transcriptions.

Data analysis. Interview transcripts and notes were analyzed using content analysis. This method allows the researcher to identify key themes and patterns from the data by coding the responses into categories. The following steps were used: (a) the interviews were recorded; (b) the recording was transcribed and identifying information was removed; (c) the data were cleaned for clarity; (d) the interview participants verified the accuracy of the transcriptions; (e) the researcher read all the transcripts multiple times before coding; (f) the researcher went through one interview transcript and highlighted key phrases making sure to use bracketing to reduce bias; (g) the researcher identified the

key themes throughout the transcript and wrote them on the left margin; (h) this process was done for all interview transcripts; (i) the key themes across all transcripts were reviewed to determine the primary themes across all the interviews and were written in the right margins of the transcripts; (j) the coding scheme was tested by using intercoder reliability; (k) once high intercoder reliability was reached, meaning was drawn from the data based on commonalities in the interviews (Hyatt, 2010; Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009).

As mentioned, a second rater was utilized to establish reliability. The steps Hyatt (2010) outlined were used to determine inter-rater reliability: (a) the primary researcher codes the data and subscribes meaning units to the data in the left margin; (b) the additional rater is trained by the primary researcher regarding the coding process by using an excerpt of the text to ensure the rater understands the coding process; (c) the second rater is given a clean copy of the data for coding and is told to read the transcription a minimum of three times—once for initial understanding and familiarity, twice for clarity and understanding, and a third time to analyze the data, applying bracketing for reduction, horizontalization, and synthesis of the data; (d) the rater and the primary research code one selected transcript together; (e) the rater uses the same process to code the rest of the transcripts without the assistance of the primary researcher; (f) after analysis, the primary researcher and rater review the conclusions and reach consensus on the primary themes. In this study, findings present in 62.5% or more of the participant responses or 5 out of the 8 participants were determined to be primary themes.

Research Findings

This section presents the results of the analyses by research question. The primary themes are outlined and supported with excerpts from the interviews. The themes are

presented in order of frequency as found in the participant responses. Findings from the literature review to substantiate the themes are also provided when relevant.

Research question 1 findings. Research question 1 asked: What are the key strategies for providing a safe and supportive learning environment? From the interviews, seven primary themes emerged under this research question: (a) close supervision, (b) alternative pathways, (c) fostering a sense of belonging, (d) safety prevention programs, (e) curriculum aligned K-12, (f) using technology to improve results, and (g) early identification and support for at-risk students.

Close supervision. All 8 respondents (100%) identified close supervision as a strategy for creating a safe and supportive learning environment for students. Examples of close supervision participants shared include strong partnerships with the local police department to supervise students, campus safety officers, controlled entrances and exits, staff supervision throughout the day, student identification worn at all times, anonymous reporting for students, and random searches. The excerpts below provide specific examples of close supervision in the words of participants. For example, Participant 5 said:

The other strategy we have regarding safety is a strong focus on supervision. We have a portal where we can post student information including their pictures. We can use our smartphones to then verify if a student is who they say they are.

Participant 8 stated:

Each one of our comprehensive high schools has on its campus each day a full-time police officer with a black and white car. We have great cooperation from the city in terms of the presence of a law enforcement officer.

Participant 1 said:

We have campus supervisors that students feel like are there to keep track of them....I think they [students] know that they are being watched and cared for.

Participant 2 stated:

People do not stay in their offices during those times that you would have a lot of people out wandering around or walking around. They are out and about.

Close supervision is also supported in the literature as a strategy to promote safety among high-performing schools. The effective schools model Edmonds (1982) and a group of researchers at Michigan State and Harvard University developed by analyzing data from a sample of high performing schools, identified seven priorities of effective or successful schools. One of those priorities was providing a safe and orderly environment where students and staff are free from harm and in an environment conducive to learning.

Alternative pathways. All 8 respondents (100%) identified alternative pathways as a strategy for creating a safe and supportive learning environment for students. Examples of alternative pathways include providing students with other opportunities to learn and complete their requirements for high school outside of a traditional learning environment. Alternative pathways include online schools, blended learning programs, independent study programs, adult schools, credit recovery programs, small learning environments (SLCs), charter schools, or continuation programs. The excerpts below elaborate on this theme. For example, Participant 1 stated:

The freshmen academy is an example of both of how we create programs that connect kids so there is a more personal relationship and tie it around learning at

the same time. In the case of the freshmen academy, we also focused on a high-risk population.

Participant 8 said:

We have intervention campuses at three of our high schools...students who let their GPA's fall below 2.0 at the end of their ninth-grade year move to a program during the 10th grade year that has smaller class sizes and designated faculty.

Participant 1 shared:

We have a continuation high school.... We have a vocational-orientated career track, and a charter school that starts with sophomores and juniors. We have a variety of options because parents and students today are looking for online or other kinds of options.... In the past, if you go back 10 years, these students would have dropped out.

In a review of the literature, the availability of alternative pathways was recommended as a strategy that states and schools could take to reduce dropout. Princiotta and Reyna (2009) outlined four action steps that governors could take to increase graduation rates and decrease dropout. One of these steps was providing more options for students to obtain a high school diploma. Another report by Steinberg and Cheryl (2008) outlined five commitments that state leaders can take to increase graduation rates. One of these commitments was ensuring there are more pathways to graduation and college success for struggling and out-of-school students. Research on smaller school models also has linked these models to higher graduation rates and positive educational outcomes for students (Almeida et al., 2009; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Werblow & Duesbery, 2009). These models include career and technical education

programs such as academies and small learning communities (Kulik, 1998; Plank et al., 2005). A call to action by leading education and policy institutions, the Civic Marshall Plan, outlines a set of steps to end the dropout epidemic (Balfanz et al., 2010). One of these steps is to develop new education options based on student and community needs and interests:

School districts and states should continue to provide and re-develop innovative alternative learning environments to engage students who have fallen off the path to high school graduation and reenroll students who have already dropped out of high school to place them on a pathway to postsecondary success. (p. 17)

Fostering a sense of belonging. Six out of 8 respondents (75%) identified fostering a sense of belonging as a strategy for creating a safe and supportive learning environment for students. Examples of how schools fostered this sense of belonging included encouraging students to get involved in extracurricular activities and providing them a large menu of activities, providing freshman students with upperclassman as mentors, having students participate in small learning communities, and personalizing the learning environment. The excerpts below elaborate on this theme. For example, Participant 7 shared:

We have moved towards a number of small learning communities because our high school campuses are over 4,000 students. That is a large number of students, and we found if we break them down into smaller groups, the students feel more connected to their school.

Participant 2 stated:

Regarding the focus on belonging, we have a full menu of activities and groups for students including choirs, bands, orchestras, yearbook, video yearbook, newspapers, and sports....It is very important to give every student a little niche.

Participant 3 said:

Ensuring students graduate has to do with making sure we are keeping them engaged. We must make sure that we are meeting all the kids' needs.

The importance of fostering a sense of belonging also has been discussed in the literature. In an international study by PISA on student engagement, researchers studied two measures of engagement—a students' sense of belonging in school and their attendance, which is a primary indicator of engagement. Results demonstrated that there are a large number of students who are disaffected from school, 25% in the U.S. (Willms, 2003). A sense of belonging in school has been linked to positive educational outcomes. For example, students with a sense of belonging exhibit higher motivation and engagement in school (Osterman, 2000).

Safety prevention programs. Five out of 8 respondents (62.5%) identified safety prevention programs as a strategy for creating a safe and supportive learning environment for students. Examples of safety prevention programs shared by participants include bullying prevention programs, programs focused on the tolerance of differences, professional development for staff on how to handle safety issues, mediation programs, and grants to support safety programs in schools. The excerpts below provide more detailed examples of safety prevention programs. For example, Participant 1 said:

Eight or more years ago, we had a couple of incidences with discrimination or lack of tolerance both for racial and sexual orientation. Both of those instances led to a consent decree for our district. This started intensive training across our district on how to be tolerant and report abuses.

Participant 3 stated:

We have a comprehensive program associated with our local law enforcement agencies concerning gang enforcement. We have many gang issues here. We do a lot of education all the way through.

Participant 6 stated:

We also have definitely promoted different tolerance education programs. We have multicultural councils and clubs at just about every school in our district. We also, of course, provide antibullying programs for all students, and all students and teachers are provided antibullying training.

When elaborating on the types of safety prevention programs schools provide, the majority of the participants focused on bullying prevention programs. According to the literature, bullying can have a significant impact on victims in terms of educational outcomes. The extent that students feel safe and valued in school is strongly linked to school performance, attendance, and youth development. “A focus on students’ social and emotional learning needs enhances learning” (Schroeder, 2010, p. 12).

Curriculum aligned K-12. Five out of 8 respondents (62.5%) identified having a curriculum aligned K-12 as a strategy for creating a safe and supportive learning environment for students. Examples of this theme include common learning goals K-12, aligned teaching strategies, strong alignment to district goals, clear goals and targets,

aligned assessment strategies, and professional development tied to learning goals. The excerpts below elaborate on this theme. For example, Participant 1 shared:

We have spent a lot of time looking at our student achievement levels and talking about what we expect to teach in each of our classes, what we want kids to be able to do, and providing multiple opportunities for kids to have a chance to learn and to show their learning.

Participant 2 said:

Our principals as a K-12 unified group meet every Wednesday. There is a shared camaraderie so that everybody knows the academic expectations are high for everybody.

Participant 1 stated:

We have spent a lot of energy and time on raising the level of our curriculum and what we expect of students and what we actually do ourselves to ensure that they learn... We've spent a lot of time aligning not only our curriculum and expectations, but even our teaching strategies across our district so that in our best teacher's classroom, or what some might say is our worst teacher's or worst school's classroom, there's going to be similarities in what we expect and how it is taught.

The literature also substantiates the importance of aligning curriculum K-12 as a strategy to promote effectiveness. Murphy and Hallinger (2001) identified common strategies of 12 school districts in California that were considered instructionally effective based on standardized test scores. A commonality among these districts was aligned curriculum and instruction practices. All of the districts were goal driven, ensured

the consistency and coordination of instructional activities, and had buy-in across the district regarding goals. Goals at the district level drove school goals, and in turn, these goals drove classroom curriculum goals and objectives. In addition, the majority of the goals in the district were focused on curricular and instructional issues. This focus on curriculum drove excellence and improvement. Further, there was a high degree of consistency across the school district in regard to curriculum. Many of the districts had preferred instructional practices that all teachers utilized, district-wide curriculum objectives, single textbook adoptions to ensure consistency in instruction from one school to the next, and requirements that principals possess a strong understanding of curriculum and instructional practices.

Using technology to improve results. Five out of 8 respondents (62.5%) identified using technology to improve results as a strategy for creating a safe and supportive learning environment for students. Examples of ways to use technology included administering common assessments online, creating digital dashboards for students and parents to monitor progress, using e-books to improve instruction, creating wireless Internet hubs for students, and using technology as a way to communicate with parents. The excerpts below provide more detailed examples of using technology to improve results in the words of participants. For example, Participant 5 shared:

Another way we are linking students to technology is by making some of our school buses wireless Internet hubs so that kids going to and from school can use their own devices, or devices we provide them, to do homework or access the Internet.

Participant 4 said:

Related to technology, another way we are supporting students is by getting devices into the hands of kids who may not have access to this technology anywhere else.

Participant 6 stated:

Our district uses technology to try to increase communication between school and home.... We have a parent portal, which parents can log onto to see curriculum and events at the school so that they know that there's a place that they can go to find out information not just about their own child but also about opportunities at the school for them to get more involved.

Participant 7 stated:

We are also opening a new school in September and every student is going to have an iPad.

Overall, technology is having a major impact on many components of the educational environment, including the role of the teacher, the curriculum, and the learner. With technology, teachers become the content curator and are responsible for identifying opportunities for students to engage with the material. Technology allows curriculum to be more immersive and personalized. The use of gaming allows the material to be more interactive. More than ever, technology allows the learner to be in charge of his or her learning. Learning can take place anytime and anywhere (Bush, 2012). The use of technology and data to drive success is a strategy highlighted in a recent report, *Building a Grad Nation* (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2012). The report spotlighted work being done in Las Vegas. In this city, innovative technology has

been used to develop a virtual school platform that links instructional resources to lessons, provides ongoing communication to students, and administers rigorous exams that provide access to student-specific data for instructional purposes. This platform is also being utilized by traditional schools in the city.

Early identification and support for at-risk students. Five out of 8 respondents (62.5%) shared that early identification and support for at-risk students was a strategy the district used to promote a safe and supportive learning environment for students. Examples of this theme included identifying and providing support to students with high rates of absenteeism, identifying and supporting students who are struggling academically or behaviorally, monitoring individual student progress more closely, and providing alternative environments, mentoring, or tutoring for struggling students. The excerpts below elaborate on this theme. For example, Participant 3 shared:

[At one school we have] targeted group counseling for students and [we have hired] a family liaison to go out and do outreach with students that are struggling, as identified by teachers and counselors.

Participant 5 stated:

A year ago, we started a new class called High School 101. This program is focused on helping our freshmen deal with issues that may come up and keeping them in school.

Participant 6 said:

We certainly have honed our ability to identify students at risk early in order to provide them with different support strategies, such as our Read 180 program. We also have a strategic math and strategic English program that is a double-block

period with some unique strategies to support their regular math and English courses.

A focus on identifying students at risk of dropping out is also a strategy for school reform discussed in the literature. In a Steinberg and Cheryl (2008) report that outlined five commitments state leaders can take to increase graduation rates, providing early and continuous support for struggling students was a key commitment highlighted. Balfanz et al. (2010), in a report focused on what is working to increase graduation rates in the nation, highlighted the use of early warning systems as a key strategy for success. States that are systematically identifying students with chronic absenteeism, course failures, and behavioral problems early and providing them with support are showing promising results, including higher rates of attendance and course completion.

Research question 1 summary. Seven major themes emerged from participant responses for research question 1: (a) close supervision, (b) alternative pathways, (c) fostering a sense of belonging, (d) safety prevention programs, (e) curriculum aligned K-12, (f) using technology to improve results, and (g) early identification and support for at-risk students. The need to provide students a safe and supportive learning environment where they can stay engaged in school is also supported in the literature (Archambault et al., 2009; Brown & Rodríguez, 2009). Ample research shows that students who eventually drop out of school experience a slow and steady process of disengagement (Lan & Lanthier, 2003; MacIver, 2011; Neild et al., 2007) and that the school environment may be a major link to whether they ultimately decide to stay in school (Balfanz & Legters, 2004; Christle et al., 2007; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006).

In the interviews, two main themes emerged for how to foster a safe environment: close supervision and safety prevention programs. Some implementation strategies included controlled entrances and exits, strong partnerships with the police department, campus safety officers, a focus on supervision by staff when classes are not in session, random searches, student identification badges, anonymous reporting, bullying prevention programs, mediation programs, and training for staff on how to deal with safety issues. Many of these strategies were also listed in the literature as best practices for high-performing schools, specifically the need to provide a safe and orderly environment conducive to learning (Edmonds, 1982).

The themes related to creating a supportive learning environment included providing alternative pathways, fostering a sense of belonging, curriculum aligned K-12, using technology to improve results, and early identification and support for at-risk students. Participants elaborated on these themes with the following strategies: (a) providing students with multiple pathways to graduation, including charter schools, academies, small learning communities, online schools, credit recovery programs, intervention schools, or adult schools; (b) providing students with a wide array of clubs and activities to feel connected to school; (c) mentoring programs for students; (d) personalizing the learning environment; (e) aligning standards, instructional strategies, and assessments across departments and schools; (f) professional development linked to common goals; (g) using technology to improve instruction; (h) getting devices in the hands of all kids; (i) using technology to communicate to parents; (j) identifying students who have patterns of absenteeism, course failures, and behavioral issues early; and (k) providing struggling students with supportive services early to get them back on track.

Balfanz et al. (2010) outlined many of these strategies in a recent report highlighting promising practices in the nation for increasing graduation rates. Azzam (2007) discussed the importance of providing support to students who are most at risk. The need for school systems to develop early warning systems that identify students at risk of dropping out early (Balfanz et al., 2010) and the use of technology and data to drive success (Balfanz et al., 2012) have also been recently identified as promising strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. Alternative pathways, including charter schools, small learning communities, and academies, have been recommended as strategies and linked to positive student outcomes in the literature (Almeida et al., 2009; Kulik, 1998; Plank et al., 2005; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Steinberg & Cheryl, 2008; Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009; Werblow & Duesbery, 2009).

Research question 2 findings. Research question 2 asked: What are the key strategies for developing a culture of high expectations for all students? From the interviews, three primary themes emerged under this research question: shared accountability, a focus on individual student progress, and rigorous curriculum.

Shared accountability. Five out of the 8 respondents (62.5%) reported that shared accountability and monitoring were strategies they used to develop a culture of high expectations. Examples include ensuring that both teachers and administrators share the responsibility of monitoring the effectiveness of instructional practices as well as student outcomes. The excerpts provide more detailed examples of how participants created a culture of high expectations by shared accountability and monitoring. For example, Participant 1 shared:

We start this [creating a culture of high expectations] by emphasizing principal leadership and accountability for results. I know it's kind of crazy to start there, but if, as an organization, we don't hold the leader in the schools accountable for improvement and for student results, you don't end with a system that holds everyone to high standards.

Participant 4 said:

You have to have the right leaders and the right people in front of kids. This cannot happen unless you have strong instructional leaders as principals.

Participant 8 stated:

All of our high school teachers and administrators are engaging our students in performance mapping, which involved interdisciplinary teaching and learning. The message is everybody needs to go to a 2-year- or 4-year college when you leave high school.

Shared accountability is also widely discussed in the literature, particularly in terms of graduation rates. Many initiatives are underway not only to hold teachers and administrators accountable for results, but communities accountable. Strive, a model being implemented in the Cincinnati, OH and Northern Kentucky region, is focused on a single goal: increasing global competitiveness in the local workforce by increasing postsecondary completion. In this model, hundreds of partners in the education, nonprofit, civic, and business sectors provide services and support to students for every stage from birth to successful career attainment. This model is being replicated in other communities across the U.S. because of its promising results. The Promise

Neighborhoods initiative initiated by the Obama administration encourages a similar model (Bathgate, Colvin, & Silva, 2011).

Focus on individual student progress. Five out of the 8 respondents (62.5%) reported that a focus on individual student progress was a strategy they used to develop a culture of high expectations. Examples of this theme include ensuring instruction is customized to meet individual student's needs, tracking results at the student level, and setting student-level goals. The excerpts below provide more clarity regarding this theme. For example, Participant 5 said:

High school is the hardest place for us to change the focus [of teachers] on seeing individual kids along a continuum of learning...they are starting to see that they are responsible for facilitating learning for a student. Our mantra is, "It's not your fault the kids are failing, but it is your responsibility."

Participant 1 said:

We have moved to saying, "We're providing that data for you so that you are better in tune with every student. What we want is every student to have a goal"...This is helping us take the emphasis off the artificial goals of trying to get a certain score as a school. The focus is on looking at every single student.

Participant 2 shared:

Our goal is to get every student to be able to graduate from high school and be college or career ready. That expectation begins in kindergarten.

Participant 4 said:

The other thing that is great about the math assessment is that information for each individual student can be downloaded to both compass and to the MAP Web

site. These programs actually come up with the right lessons at the right level for those kids so the teachers don't have to spend time setting up what lessons each kid should go through.

Participant 7 stated:

The teachers administer pre- and posttests to students throughout the year in a very nonthreatening way to show them where they need to focus and to identify the needs of individual students in terms of instruction.

The importance of targeting instruction at the individual student is supported in the literature. For example, Azzam (2007) discussed the importance of providing students who are most at risk with the support they need, including individualized instruction. In a study to identify common priorities among the most successful high schools in the country along with their feeder middle and elementary schools, two of the nine priorities identified were a laser-like focus on data at the classroom level to make daily instructional decisions for individual students and high-quality curriculum and instruction that focuses on rigor and relevance (Daggett, 2005).

Rigorous curriculum. Five out of the 8 respondents (62.5%) reported that a focus on rigorous curriculum was a strategy they used to develop a culture of high expectations. Examples of this theme include ensuring standards are rigorous, instructional strategies are tested, and that rigorously developed programs are used. The excerpts below provide more clarity regarding this theme. For example, Participant 6 stated:

We have the Pythagoras project, which is a partnership with the local colleges and universities. It focuses on math competencies and skills, collaborating with universities in terms of college expectations, and infusing our middle school and

high school curriculums with best-practice strategies for math.

Participant 5 said:

Right now, the reading and training in the principal academies is focused on rigorous curriculum design. The other thing we have is specialized training and coaching with individual teachers or groups of teachers on instructional practices, classroom management, and curriculum.

Participant 4 shared:

It [the math program we use] pushes kids to higher levels of math and helps them develop critical thinking skills that will help in other subjects, which is something we need to do. Therefore, these new programs, the formative assessment, and the new math and language arts programs are strategies that we are implementing to strengthen our curriculum and support learning, despite large class sizes.

Participant 3 stated:

One of the things that we continue to work on is our level of rigor. The California standards are all pretty rigorous compared to other states.

Increasing the level of rigor is also a strategy that was highlighted in a recent report focused on what is working across the nation to increase high school graduation rates (Balfanz et al., 2010). “Rigor and high expectations make a big difference” (p. 9). The adoption of Common Core Standards, common assessments, and an increase in graduation standards are cited as specific strategies that are showing success. In a National High School Center report (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007), balancing rigor with relevance was identified as a best practice that would lead to more students staying in school. This report also cited Lee and Burkham (2000) research, which showed high

schools that offered more academic courses and few nonacademic courses had lower dropout rates. Specifically, lower dropout rates were associated with schools that offered Calculus and few classes below the level of Algebra I.

Research question 2 summary. Three major themes emerged from participant responses for research question 2: (a) shared accountability, (b) a focus on individual student progress, and (c) rigorous curriculum. The literature supports all of these themes. National models such as Strive and Promise Neighborhoods (Bathgate et al., 2011) provide models for shared accountability among parents, students, school administrators, and community members. Several reform and policy efforts have brought educators and lawmakers together to change laws, identify funding, advocate at the federal level for change, and develop statewide programs to address high school graduation rates (Balfanz et al., 2010; Princiotta & Reyna, 2009; Steinberg & Cheryl, 2008). Among interview participants, shared accountability included ensuring students, parents, teachers, and district-level staff understand goals and have responsibility for meeting these goals and intermediate targets. This includes ensuring principals are accountable for instruction and serve as the instructional leader for the school.

A focus on individual student progress was another theme identified by interview participants for this research question. Examples included tracking individual student progress through ongoing assessments in order to personalize instruction, setting student-level goals, and tracking students as they move throughout the district so they do not fall off-track toward graduation. The need to develop statewide tracking systems in order to track an individual student's progression through school has received considerable attention in the Obama administration. Significant funding opportunities through the

American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 have been provided to states in order to develop longitudinal data tracking systems that more accurately measure graduation rates and early warning systems that identify students at greatest risk for high school dropout (Balfanz et al., 2010).

The last theme for this research question was rigorous curriculum. Increasing the rigor of curriculum is a strategy that has been discussed in the literature as a method to create high expectations and to lower dropout rates (Balfanz et al., 2010; Kennelly & Monrad, 2007; Lee & Burkham, 2000). Collaborative networks among educators, business partners, and policymakers, such as the American Diploma Program, are focused on increasing the rigor of standards and curriculum, aligning high schools with postsecondary education and workforce demands, and holding schools accountable (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009). Examples that interview participants gave for increasing the rigor of curriculum included using evidenced-based programs, collaborating with local colleges and universities to provide programs, testing instructional strategies using ongoing assessments, and implementing common core standards and strategies.

Research question 3 findings. Research question 3 asked: What are the key strategies for ensuring effective leadership at all levels? From the interviews, two primary themes emerged for this research question: leadership development and collaboration and sharing of best practices.

Leadership development. Seven out of 8 respondents (87.5%) identified leadership development as a strategy for ensuring effective leadership at all levels. Examples given for this theme included strong professional development training, principal and assistant principal institutes or academies, strong commitment to

identifying and building leadership capacity at the school level, and mentoring programs. The excerpts below provide more detailed examples of leadership development. For example, Participant 7 said:

For new principals, we have mentorship programs to provide more support. Often the mentors are retired principals. We try to give principals as much support as possible because everything is dependent on the leadership at the top.

Participant 6 stated:

Potential leadership is encouraged at the site level and natural leaders from the site level are encouraged to take on different site-level leadership roles and then also to bring them onto district-level teams.

Participant 8 said:

We do have an approach where we identify potential leaders. First, no one becomes a leader in our district until he or she has had a successful teaching career, minimum of 5 years. We try to identify those people as they do their work in our district. Then we put them in a program where we begin to mentor them for an administrative position.

Participant 3 shared:

We provide a tremendous amount of professional development for our school leaders. We have high expectations for the leaders in the district. I really believe that our teachers are well trained. We spend a lot of time training our teachers and our principals and making sure that they have the right professional development and are up to date on everything we are trying to accomplish as a district.

The importance of ensuring leadership effectiveness is supported in the literature.

In the Civic Marshall Plan, developed by leading education and policy institutions (Balfanz et al., 2010), a specific call to action for school districts is to train and support highly effective and accountable principals:

Principals, school leaders, and a collegial school environment are keys to raising student achievement. School districts must ensure that experienced principals with high-quality professional training and leadership development have more control over budgeting and scheduling, as well as the hiring, mentoring, development, and, as a last resort when leadership and support have failed to produce desired expectations, the firing of their teachers and staff. (p. 19)

Collaboration and sharing of best practices. Six out of the 8 respondents (75%) reported that collaboration and sharing of best practices were strategies they used to ensure effective leadership at all levels. Examples of this theme include department, school-wide, and district meetings; sharing of best practices within and outside the district; and strong professional learning communities. The excerpts below show how sites use collaboration to create a culture of high expectations. Participant 7 shared:

We have a very close partnership with another district about our size. Teachers and administrators from this district visit us and we go there to visit in order to maintain an open dialogue and share best practices.

Participant 2 said:

During the school year, the principals meet every Wednesday as a principal group. Sometimes people say, “You can meet to death,” but I think our meetings are much more focused now in terms of what our academic goals are in nature.

Participant 6 stated:

[We have a program] called Completion Counts that allows us to work with our sister district.... We have teamed up with the other district, the mayor's office, the Chamber of Commerce, our business community, and our postsecondary institutions to work collaboratively towards a goal of increasing college going in and increasing college completion rates.

Participant 8 said:

Our high school principals and assistant principals divide the academic program up so there is always someone attending department meetings, whether it is math, science, language arts...the expectation is that our administrators roll up their sleeves, collaborate with the teachers, and help all they can.

In a comprehensive report published by McKinsey, *How the World's Most Improved School Systems Keep Getting Better* (Mourshed, Chijioke, & Barber, 2010), a sample of school systems that achieved significant, sustained, and widespread gains on student outcomes as measured by national and international assessments from 1980 to the present, were studied. The goal was to understand the strategies contributing to their success. From the sample, a pattern that emerged was a shift from central guidance to school-based collaboration. As systems improved, there was a greater reliance on peer collaboration among teachers and administrators. Teacher collaboration was seen as a driver of improvement because it enhanced innovation in teaching and learning. The use of collaborative practice where teachers and school leaders work together to develop effective instructional practices by studying what works in the classroom was seen as a method for system improvement. Furthermore, the findings also demonstrated that

collaboration between schools to share learning, standardize practice, and support each other was another practice for system improvement.

Research question 3 summary. Two major themes emerged from participant responses for research question 3: leadership development and collaboration and sharing of best practices. Examples of leadership development given by the respondents included strong professional development linked to district-level goals, mentoring programs for new leaders, leadership institutes and academies, strong commitment to identifying and building leadership capacity at the school level, and opportunities for emerging leaders to take on new roles. The training and support of leaders is highly supported in the literature as a method of increasing student performance (Balfanz et al., 2010). Annual research of the progress states are making in improving graduation rates demonstrate that a focus on strong leadership is one strategy that is showing promising results (Balfanz et al., 2010, 2012).

The second theme for research question 3 was collaboration and sharing of best practices. Interview participants described the importance of having teachers collaborate with other teachers within their school and with other schools in the district.

Administrators encouraged release days for teachers to shadow other professionals who show promising results. Department-level meetings, professional learning communities, and data teams are other methods of increasing collaboration and sharing best practices. In addition to sharing practices across the district, many of the participants also worked with other districts to share data and promising instructional strategies.

Both of these themes are highly supported in the literature. Among a study of high-performing schools, ensuring effective leadership at all levels and strong

collaboration between teachers and administrators were strategies that were consistently identified as promising practices (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006).

Research question 4 findings. Research question 4 asked: What are the key strategies for data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance? From the interviews, two primary themes emerged for this research question: common assessments and data-driven instruction.

Common assessments. All 8 respondents (100%) reported that the use of common assessments was a strategy used for data-driven decision making and monitoring student performance. Examples of this theme include common assessments across departments, district-wide assessments, and setting common benchmarks. The excerpt below from Participant 2 provides more clarity regarding this theme:

From a comprehensive standpoint, we have common assessments, common benchmarks, and common end of course exams...If a student takes Algebra I in eighth grade or if they take Algebra I in ninth grade, even though one's at a middle school and one's at a high school, they use the same course map; they use the same course requirements; they take the same finals in December, and the same finals in June.

According to the literature, the use of data to make decisions and monitor performance has become more prevalent as a strategy to increase the effectiveness of schools. Frequent monitoring of student progress by using multiple assessment methods has been identified as a strategy to increase effectiveness as early as the late '80s and early '90s (Lake Forest College, 2010). The focus on developing common assessments

across departments, grades, schools, districts, and states is gaining momentum.

Proponents of common assessments assert they are more efficient, equitable, effective, and essential to implementing systemic interventions when students are not learning, while critics argue they limit autonomy (DuFour, DuFour, & Eaker, 2007).

Data-driven instruction. Five out of the 8 respondents (62.5%) reported that data-driven instruction was a strategy they used for decision making and monitoring of student performance. Examples of this theme include being intentional about data, setting targets, using data to improve performance, and developing data teams. The excerpts below provide more detailed examples of how the participants use data-driven instruction to drive decisions and monitor performance. Participant 5 said:

We have developed data teams...Data teams have really made a difference. It has made everybody stop, reflect on teaching strategies, and analyze how each individual student is performing.

Participant 1 stated:

We are getting more refined where we are giving teachers at every level a sense of how many students over a trend period of 3 years have improved, stayed the same, or regressed. Teachers can look at that themselves, the department, or the grade level, depending on where they are, and see that data.

Participant 4 shared:

The data that comes back from the student achievement tests are used in the data teams to analyze and prescribe new lessons or regroup kids for more directed instruction.

Participant 6 stated:

We have developed a way to query multiple measures for students that include CST scores for 2 years, their CELDT scores, their benchmark assessment, and their grades....The data is used for placement, for interventions, for additional support that students might need, both in terms of intervention support for students at risk and for students that would be candidates for acceleration who sometimes fall between the cracks because that data is not being monitored well.

In a Shannon and Bylsma (2006) comprehensive study to identify priorities of high-performing schools, frequent monitoring and teaching through ongoing student assessments and teachers evaluations were strategies employed by high-performing schools. These assessments were used to adapt and improve instructional programs as well as determine if supportive services or additional instructional time were needed for students. McLeod (2005) asserts that data-driven decision making enhances student learning and informs teacher practice by incorporating the following elements:

...good baseline data, measurable instructional goals, frequent formative assessment, professional learning communities, and focused instructional interventions. (p. 1)

Research question 4 summary. Two primary themes emerged from participant responses for research question 4: common assessments and data-driven instruction.

Interview participants described the development and use of common assessments across classrooms, departments, grades, subjects, schools, and districts. These assessments were used to set common targets and to test the effectiveness of instructional strategies. The literature also supports the use of common assessments, which include formative and

summative assessments that allow instructors to set common benchmarks. Common assessments increase efficiency, effectiveness, and equitability (DuFour et al., 2007). Many of these assessments are being developed or have been developed to align to the Common Core Standards that were released in 2010. These standards are showing promising results in standardizing and improving student outcomes across states (Balfanz et al., 2010). Two consortiums received federal funding to develop common assessments that tie to the common core mathematics and English language arts standards: the Partnership for Assessment of Readiness for College and Careers and the SMARTER Balanced Assessment Consortium (Loveless, 2010).

The second theme for this research question was data-driven instruction. Participants described the importance of being intentional about data. In other words, using data to understand what instructional strategies are effective with individuals or groups of students and setting targets from available data such as formative and summative assessments. Based on participant interviews, data-driven instruction includes using data to monitor performance, set goals, and hold one another accountable. School data teams were frequently cited among participants as a strategy used to facilitate the use of data.

Data driven instruction, using data to increase school efficiencies and improve student achievement (Messelt, 2004), has received considerable attention in the literature. The use of data to make decisions about instruction has been linked to enhanced student learning and improved instructional practices (Balfanz et al., 2010; McLeod, 2005). Furthermore, data-driven decision making has been identified in numerous studies as a

strategy used by high-performing schools (Daggett, 2005; Edmonds, 1982; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006).

Research question 5 findings. Research question 5 asked: What are the key strategies for ensuring strong collaboration between teachers and administrators? From the interviews, two primary themes emerged for this research question: focused collaboration and professional learning communities.

Focused collaboration. Five out of the 8 respondents (62.5%) reported that focused collaboration was a strategy used for ensuring strong collaboration between teachers and administrators. Examples of this theme include (a) release time for departments and schools to review goals, targets, and results; (b) open dialogue between teachers and departments regarding instruction; (c) district-level instructional meetings; and (d) department meetings focused on specific topics. The excerpts below provide more clarity regarding this theme. For example, Participant 1 shared:

Eight years ago, we started talking more about collaboration and the need to move towards a collegial team. As a result, we have focused on going from “Leave me alone so I can work with my students,” to, “Here are some things that we need to talk about regarding learning and how we know if kids are learning?”

Participant 2 said:

This summer we have all of our high school folks in English and math looking at directive and interactive instruction through professional development....These common trainings help them to realize, “Wow, everybody’s doing the same thing.”

Participant 6 said:

We have a middle school task force and a high school task force that operates at the district level and both of these task forces include counselors, teachers, coordinators, assistant principals, and principals. In the district, there is much more of a willingness to collapse some of the hierarchies and focus on collaboration.

Focused collaboration as a strategy to improve performance is also validated in the literature. According to Shannon and Bylsma (2006), schools that are high performing create an environment focused on collaboration among teachers, administrators, and parents in order to drive student success. Implementation practices such as common planning time for teachers, team teaching, and professional development are used to encourage collaboration.

Professional learning communities. Five out of the 8 respondents (62.5%) reported that establishing strong professional learning communities was a strategy used for ensuring strong collaboration between teachers and administrators. The excerpts below provide more information regarding the use of professional learning communities. For example, Participant 1 shared:

About 5 or 6 years ago—I remember the superintendent then actually standing in front of all the principals at the Principal Institute saying, “A district close by us, they’ve been tremendously successful and I sat down with the superintendent.

And what did he say?”...He then sort of described, in a nutshell, the PLC [professional learning communities] structure and said that is what we need to do.

Participant 4 said:

The last 2 years we have been working on developing professional learning communities. This approach honors the classroom teacher as a professional and a decision maker and it tries to make sure teachers have a very clear understanding of goals and targets.

Participant 3 shared:

We have PLCs [professional learning communities] that are targeted and meet to discuss kids. We use data. We have a ton of data on the students and we move students when needed.

Participant 6 said:

[With regard] to promoting collaboration between teachers and administrators at the school site, each of our schools does embrace a PLC [professional learning community] model.

Professional learning communities have received considerable attention in the literature as a method to increase collaboration among teachers and administrators and promote student success. Balfanz et al. (2010) identified the development of professional learning communities as an intervention that schools and states are using to boost teacher effectiveness. The model DuFour developed has been linked to a decrease in student absenteeism, achievement gaps, and high school dropout (Hord, 1997).

Research question 5 summary. Two primary themes emerged for this research question: focused collaboration and professional learning communities. The interview participants described focused collaboration as scheduled time for teachers and administrators to discuss instructional strategies, release time for departments to review

goals and results, and school- and district-level instructional meetings focused on student achievement. This strategy is also supported in the literature. One of the four leading principles of the Civic Marshall Plan, a call to action by leading education and policy institutions, is thoughtful collaboration (Balfanz et al., 2012): “Ending the dropout crisis requires an all-hands-on-deck approach. To achieve collective impact, collaborations must be deliberately planned, guided by shared metrics and thoughtfully integrated to maximize efficiency and outcomes” (p. 20).

The other theme that emerged with participants when discussing strong collaboration between teachers and administrators was the use of professional learning communities. Professional learning communities encourage teachers and administrators to work together to discuss student data and instructional strategies. Many of the interviewees discussed having well-functioning professional learning communities in place for many years. The literature strongly supports the use of professional learning communities. Professional learning communities are being used as a strategy to boost teacher effectiveness and improve student results (Balfanz et al., 2010; DuFour et al., 2007; Hord, 1997). Studies have linked well-developed professional learning communities to improved teaching practice, attendance, and student achievement (Hord, 1997; Vescio, Ross, & Adams, 2008).

Research question 6 findings. The last research question asked: What are the key strategies for maintaining high levels of parent and community support and engagement? From the interviews, three primary themes emerged for this research question: connecting parents to school, strong collaboration between school and community, and transparency.

Connecting parents to school. Six out of the 8 respondents (75%) reported that connecting parents to school was a strategy used for maintaining high levels of parent support and engagement. Various methods were discussed across the interviews to facilitate this connection, including school site councils, PTAs/PTSAs, booster groups, advisory groups, trainings, volunteer programs, targeted communication to parents, and portals for parents to access information about the school and/or their child(ren). The excerpts below provide more information regarding this theme. Participant 3 said:

What we do for our high school parents, for example—some examples I can give you is we have a partnership with University of California. They come in and do a parent empowerment program.

Participant 6 stated:

We have meetings for parents of students with disabilities and meetings for our English language learners and their families that meet regularly....Our superintendent convenes an advisory group that meets once a month, and he obtains input from parents about how the district is doing and what they would like to see.

Participant 7 said:

Parent support is very important. That was one reason we developed school loop so that parents could have access to everything that is going on at school. We encourage parents to be part of their child's school.

In the literature, strong parent support has been identified as a priority of high-performing schools. Shannon and Bylsma (2006) concluded that high-performing schools encourage commitment and shared ownership with parents and members of the

community by fostering parent involvement and building partnerships with businesses and organizations in the community. Balfanz et al. (2010) lists parent engagement as a strategy to increase graduation rates. Florida's family engagement laws were cited as an example of how progress is being made at the state level with regard to parent engagement. Additional strategies discussed include the use of text messages to inform parents, the creation of parent centers, and partnerships with TV stations to disseminate information to parents.

Strong collaboration between school and community. Six out of the 8 respondents (75%) indicated that strong collaboration between the school and community was a strategy used for maintaining high levels of community support and engagement. Examples of this collaboration includes principal and superintendent involvement in community groups, partnerships with local colleges and universities, community advisory groups for schools, partnerships with the Chamber of Commerce, school business partners, and principal for a day events for the community. The excerpts below provide more information regarding this theme. For example, Participant 6 said:

We have a small-town approach even though we are not a small community. However, we are a very tight-knit community. Our Chamber of Commerce, businesses, and postsecondary institutions have a very solid commitment to working together to further our city's goals.

Participant 7 stated:

Each school has partners and I know some schools have maybe 400 business partners. They try to engage all of the businesses within a certain radius of their

school to help in some way with the school. They have breakfast meetings where business partners are honored. It is just another way of involving our community.

Participant 3 said:

We are strongly supported by our community, especially our agriculture community. Our agricultural community spends a lot of effort and money on our agriculture program because that is something they are passionate about. At our other high school, we also have some engineering companies that support, for example, our school of engineering. We have a fantastic robotics program here at the district.

Participant 4 stated:

The other thing we are doing is we are trying to develop partnerships in the community...the bigger partnership that began this year involves about 40 agencies, including the District Attorney's Office, drug rehab groups, and all the different community service groups in the county that service this area. We have held collaborative monthly meetings to talk about things going on in the district and how we can work together to ensure that schools are effective.

Strong community support is a strategy supported in the literature. In an exploratory study of 12 school districts in California that were considered instructionally effective, Murphy and Hallinger (2001) identified 17 themes across the districts. One of these themes was community acceptance. In these school districts, the outside community was very accepting of the activities of the school. The International Center for Leadership in Education also has developed, based on research of successful schools, a list of criteria to be used to identify highly successful schools. A key criterion is community

engagement in the school. In *Building a Grad Nation* (Balfanz et al., 2012), innovative collaborations between businesses and schools were highlighted as a strategy contributing to rising graduation rates in Georgia, a state that is making promising progress.

Transparency. The last theme for this research question was transparency. Five out of the 8 respondents (62.5%) indicated that transparency was a strategy used for maintaining high levels of community support and engagement. While the specifics of establishing transparency manifested differently from district to district, there were some common strategies used, including administrator- or superintendent-hosted forums, community listening sessions, regular updates regarding happenings in the school district in local newspapers or local TV stations, televised board meetings, and collaborative budgeting sessions. The excerpts below provide more information regarding this theme. For example, Participant 3 said:

We also have had a very collaborative budgeting process where we have reached out to every school site in terms of priorities for budgeting. In addition, at the community meetings, we have done the same thing in order to be extremely transparent in terms of what we are trying to do.

Participant 2 stated:

We have a forum once a month and that is designed for community people to come to us and say, “Here’s something going on that I’ve heard. Can you fill me in?”

Participant 1 shared:

Rather than a violent fight on campus being on the front page or on the local section [of the newspaper]—that’ll always be there—we showcase successes,

whether it's a mock trial, Science Olympiad teams, whatever it is. We have a tremendous amount of great things to share.

Participant 6 said:

We have principal summits.... They are open to the public and other schools or districts. At these principal summits, each principal gives a 45-minute report describing the data for their school.

Studies regarding school district transparency are not vast in the literature. The majority of reports available are focused on mandates required by the NCLB Act. While a goal of NCLB was to increase transparency and accountability, there is much debate on the effectiveness of this legislation (Education Week, 2012). However, there is growing consensus, substantiated by participants in this study, that transparency increases accountability and builds trust among families and schools (Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010).

Research question 6 summary. Three major themes emerged from participant responses for the last research question: (a) connecting parents to school, (b) strong collaboration between school and community, and (c) transparency. The examples that participants gave for connecting parents to school was advisory councils and committees such as PTA/PTAS, booster clubs, site-based councils, parent trainings, volunteer programs, and parent advisory groups for special populations. Another strategy participants shared included ensuring parents had access to information about their child through a parent portal that provided school-based event information, grades, homework information, attendance, and an avenue for parents to connect with teachers. The importance of connecting parents to school has been discussed in the literature as a

strategy of high-performing schools (Balfanz et al., 2010; Shannon & Bylsma, 2006).

Overall, parent engagement in school has been linked to students' academic performance and their decision to stay in school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Strom & Boster, 2007; Terry, 2008).

In addition to parent support, a focus on building community support and engagement was another primary strategy participants discussed and that appears in the literature as a strategy that has shown promising success increasing student achievement (Balfanz et al., 2010; Murphy & Hallinger, 2001). Interview participants discussed multiple strategies for increasing community engagement, including establishing business partners with schools, holding community-wide events in the schools, hosting community forums, and having school representation in community service organizations.

The last theme discussed in regard to strong collaboration between school and community is transparency. Participants described the need for schools to be accountable to the community in terms of student achievement and to share openly challenges and successes via community forums, televised board meetings, media outlets, and community advisory councils. While this strategy has not been widely discussed in the literature, the majority of participants in this study associated it with increased levels of trust and shared accountability.

Conclusions

The purpose of this study was to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that are exceeding expected graduation rates. Interviews with leaders of these school districts revealed a number of promising strategies. Among the participants, a myriad of

strategies were identified. Across the interviews, there was not a strategy that was identified as the single strategy for improving graduation rates; however, there was consensus that a number of strategies implemented simultaneously have an impact on increasing graduation rates. The interviews conducted for this study focused on these common strategies. Overall, 19 primary themes were identified under the six research questions. Table 18 summarizes the primary themes the research questions identified. Examples for each theme also are provided.

Table 18

Overview of Primary Themes and Examples by Research Question

Research Questions	Primary Themes	Examples by theme (e.g., 1, 2...)
What are the key strategies for providing a safe and supportive learning environment?	1. Close supervision	1. School safety officers, partnerships with police, controlled exits/entrances, student identification, strong supervision by staff, anonymous reporting
	2. Alternative pathways	2. Alternative pathways (e.g., online schools, credit recovery programs, adult schools)
	3. Fostering a sense of belonging	3. Mentoring programs for freshmen students, large menu of activities, small learning communities, personalized learning environments
	4. Safety prevention programs	4. Bullying prevention programs, mediation programs, gang awareness and enforcement
	5. Curriculum aligned K-12	5. Common goals and assessments K-12, aligned teaching strategies, clear goals and targets, professional development tied to learning goals

(continued)

Research Questions	Primary Themes	Examples by theme (e.g., 1, 2...)
	6. Using technology to improve results	6. Using technology to improve instruction, getting devices in the hands of all kids, using technology to communicate to parents
	7. Early identification and support of at-risk students	7. Identifying students who have patterns of absenteeism, course failures, and behavioral issues early, providing struggling students with supportive services early
What are the key strategies for developing a culture of high expectations?	1. Shared accountability	1. Shared accountability among students, parents, teachers, and district-level staff, ensuring principals serve as the instructional leader of the school.
	2. Focus on individual student progress	2. Tracking individuals student progress through ongoing assessments, setting student-level goals, tracking students as they move so they do not fall off-track
	3. Rigorous curriculum	3. Implementing evidenced-based programs, collaborating with local colleges and universities to provide programs, testing instructional strategies using ongoing assessments, common core standards
What are the key strategies for ensuring effective leadership at all levels?	1. Leadership development	1. Strong professional development linked to district-level goals, mentoring programs for new leaders, leadership institutes and academies, strong commitment to identifying and building leadership capacity at the school level

(continued)

Research Questions	Primary Themes	Examples by theme (e.g., 1, 2...)
	2. Collaboration and sharing best practices	2. Collaboration within school, across schools, and across districts, release days for teachers to shadow other professionals, department-level meetings, professional learning communities, collaboration with other districts to share promising strategies.
What are the key strategies for data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance?	1. Common Assessments	1. Common formative and summative assessments across subjects, departments, and school, setting common benchmarks
	2. Data-driven instruction	2. Evidenced-based instruction, intentionality about data, using data to improve performance, developing data teams
What are the key strategies for ensuring strong collaboration between teachers and administrators?	1. Focused collaboration	1. Release times, department meetings, common prep and planning time, collaboration setting targets, open dialogue between teachers and departments regarding instruction, district-level instructional meetings, and department meetings focused on specific topics
	2. Professional learning communities	2. Well-functioning PLCs
What are the key strategies for maintaining high levels of parent and community support and engagement?	1. Connecting parents to school	1. School site councils, PTAs/PTSAs, booster groups, advisory groups, parent trainings, volunteer programs, targeted communication to parents, parent portals

(continued)

Research Questions	Primary Themes	Examples by theme (e.g., 1, 2...)
	2. Strong collaboration between school and community	2. Principal and superintendent involvement in community groups, partnerships with local colleges and universities, community advisory groups, business partners, community and school-sponsored events
	3. Transparency	3. Community listening sessions, using local media outlets, positive PR, televised board meetings, collaborative budgeting sessions

Implications Based on Findings

The findings from this study provided insight into key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates at the school and district levels. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that were exceeding expected graduation rates (Diplomas Count, 2010). These school districts were identified as school districts that are defying expectations based on their size, student to teacher ratios, racial-ethnic diversity, socioeconomic breakdown, and spending patterns (Diplomas Count, 2010; Swanson, 2010). Interviews were conducted with leaders in each of the identified districts. Overall, 8 participants who met the criteria of serving as superintendent, assistant superintendent, board member, or district-level instructional leader were interviewed by phone or via Skype. Nine interview questions that tie to the research questions were developed. The findings suggest implications for education leaders (i.e., district leaders, principals, and teachers), community partners (i.e., businesses and nonprofits), parents, and policymakers.

Implications for education leaders. Based on the literature and the interviews conducted for this study, numerous strategies were identified that are relevant for education leaders at the district and school levels. At the district level, a strong focus on creating and articulating K-12 district-level goals are imperative. Based on the interviews, common K-12 goals encourage (a) collaboration and alignment among instructional strategies and assessments, (b) develop shared accountability for goals, (c) increase the effectiveness of monitoring, and (d) encourage equitability. Interviewees also discussed the importance of having districts work with the school board, schools, and policymakers to ensure that students have alternative pathways when they are not succeeding in a traditional environment. Examples of alternative pathways participants gave include (a) charter schools, (b) small learning communities, (c) credit recovery programs, (d) academies, (e) intervention schools, and (f) adult schools. Other district-level strategies identified were providing current leaders with strong professional development, particularly tied to district-level goals, and developing methods to identify and train potential leaders. Additionally, as the interview excerpts demonstrated, districts can be the convener of district-level leadership meetings among principals, vice principals, teachers, and other instructional leaders to discuss common goals, assessments, strategies, and the sharing of best practices. Another strategy for districts is identifying funding opportunities and support for the increased use of technology to improve results. This technology can be used as a platform to administer common assessments, communicate to parents, and put technology in the hands of students who may not have access to it otherwise. Last, school districts have the opportunity to foster an environment of transparency. They can work with educators, parents, nonprofits,

policymakers, and businesses to identify promising strategies and openly discuss challenges that are present in the district that consequently impact the community. Holding public forums, televising board meetings, and having district-level participation in community-wide advisory groups are some examples participants shared on enhancing transparency.

The majority of strategies discussed in the interviews were strategies that can be implemented at the school level. For example, one strategy is creating an environment where students feel safe and in which they belong. Creating this type of environment means having strong supervision and various options, other than academics, for students to feel connected to school. Mentoring programs for freshmen students was another avenue discussed for increasing this sense of belonging.

Another school-level strategy across multiple research questions was fostering collaboration. According to participants, teachers and administrators can have success by developing a culture of shared accountability and a process for the sharing of best practices. Professional learning communities were identified as a strategy that can foster this type of collaboration and best practice sharing. In addition, department- and subject-level meetings were also recommended. Common goals, assessments, and strategies were frequently mentioned as a method to increase collaboration and identify students who are at-risk early and develop appropriate interventions. With common assessments, teachers can also identify ways to personalize the learning environment for students who are struggling, set individual student-level goals, and test the rigor of curriculum or teaching strategies. Participants also discussed the importance of extending and encouraging collaboration across schools.

Another school-level strategy participants discussed frequently was having intentionality with data. There is a plethora of data available to teachers and administrators through formative and summative assessments. Data teams and professional learning communities were cited as strategies to help educators use this data to improve instruction and outcomes.

Another strategy participants discussed was encouraging engagement and support with parents, business partners, and nonprofits. Giving these groups multiple opportunities to be involved in school events, advisory groups, and as partners in instruction will increase shared accountability.

Implications for community partners. The success of schools is not just the responsibility of districts, principals, parents, and teachers; it is the responsibility of the communities in which they reside. Strong schools foster a talented pipeline of workers and encourage economic development. Community members can be active partners with schools. Examples shared by participants include (a) being involved in advisory groups, (b) attending board meetings, and (c) inviting school leaders to participate in community-wide organizations. This shared accountability can lead to promising results, particularly higher graduation rates.

Implications for parents. The literature and the interviews also stressed the importance of connecting parents to school. As shared by participants, schools need to be creative, especially at the high school level, to encourage parent support and involvement. This can be done through PTAs/PTSAs, parent training, advisory groups, and events. Additionally, schools can develop additional methods to communicate to parents what is happening in the school and with their child. Interview participants shared

creative methods such as developing parent portals. The literature substantiates that communication between parents and children about school is connected to whether a student decides to stay in school or become a dropout (Strom & Boster, 2007).

Implications for policymakers. In the public policy arena, the interview participants stressed the importance of shared accountability among educators, parents, community members, and policymakers. All are responsible for the success of schools and individual students. Individuals working in the public policy arena have the opportunity to be involved in this issue by building collaborative networks, drawing attention to this issue at the national level, advocating for systems that track and identify students at risk early, and by promoting transparency.

Those working in the policy arena have the ability to establish collaborative networks, similar to the American Diploma Program (Cohen & Smerdon, 2009), between business partners, postsecondary institutions, and other key stakeholders to increase rigor and promote alignment of school and workforce expectations. Additionally, policymakers can work to establish coalitions between states, similar to the common core standards movement, to develop common standards in other subject areas and to develop common assessment strategies. As evidenced by the feedback obtained from those interviewed, common standards and assessment promote consistency, rigor, and collaboration.

State policymakers can also incorporate high school graduation measures into their accountability systems. Princiotta and Reyna (2009) outlined this strategy in a report to governors as a method that governors could take to increase graduation rates and decrease dropout.

Policymakers can advocate for the establishment of alternative pathways, data tracking systems, and the establishment of early warning systems. Additionally, policymakers can encourage transparency among districts and state education systems.

Recommendations for Future Research

An issue of great concern for the U.S. is the number of students who are dropping out of school. The need for a high school diploma has become increasingly more important in order to maintain global competitiveness (Amos, 2008; Steinberg & Cheryl, 2008). Despite this fact, approximately 7,000 children drop out of school in the U.S. every day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). As a nation, we need to work together to address this crisis. The purpose of this study was to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that were exceeding expected graduation rates. Through interviews with district leaders, a number of promising strategies to increase graduation rates were identified, but as with any study, the research could be expanded. The following are recommendations for further research:

1. The present study was focused on school districts in California that are exceeding expected graduation rates. As a result, findings in other parts of the U.S. may yield different results. The study could be replicated with additional states, districts, and schools that were identified as demonstrating higher than anticipated graduation rates to see if similar strategies are identified.
2. The population in this study was limited to five of the 21 districts that were identified by the EPE Research Center as school districts that were defying

expectations. The study could be replicated to explore if the other 15 districts produce similar or contradictory findings.

3. This study was limited to unified school districts. The study could be replicated with districts that are not unified to see if they produce similar or contradictory findings.
4. This study was limited to the perspective of leaders in the school district. Results from any other stakeholder group may yield different responses. A recommendation for future research is to replicate the study and expand stakeholders to principals, teachers, parents, and students.
5. Graduation rates are reported and calculated using many different methods. The current study used the cumulative promotion index as the primary method of calculating graduation rates. A recommendation for future research is to study districts that are exceeding expectation graduation rates using other calculations.
6. Conduct an in-depth study regarding how schools and districts can create a culture focused on collaboration since this was a recurring theme across research questions.
7. Conduct an in-depth study regarding the effective use of professional learning communities since this was a common strategy identified across research questions.
8. Conduct a longitudinal study with a cohort of students who have been identified as at-risk as a result of high patterns of absenteeism, course failures, and behavioral problems. Track the programs and interventions these students

completed and collect qualitative data from participants regarding the effectiveness of these interventions in keeping the students engaged in school.

9. Conduct an intercultural study to determine if culture plays a role in what strategies are effective for increasing high school graduation.
10. The study utilized a qualitative design. A quantitative approach could also be utilized to provide a different or additional perspective.

Summary

This chapter presented the findings and conclusions of a study focused on increasing high school graduation rates. The chapter began with an overview of the issue being studied, background research on high school dropout, a description of the research questions and conceptual framework, a description of the methodology and analyses, findings by research question, implications for practice, and recommendations for future research.

The purpose of this study is to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study examined the practices in five school districts in California that are exceeding expected graduation rates according to the EPE Research Center. The study used a qualitative methodology with which leaders in each of these districts were interviewed to determine the primary strategies for contributing to their success. For the purposes of this study, a leader was defined as the superintendent, assistant superintendent, board member, or district-level instructional leader. In order to focus the research on the most relevant issues, a review of the literature was conducted to identify key priorities of high performing schools. These key priorities served as the conceptual framework and were used to develop the six research questions for this study and

corresponding nine interview questions. Eight interviews, lasting between 45 minutes to 2 hours, were conducted via phone or Skype. The interviews were recorded, transcribed, and verified by participants. Content analysis was used to identify primary themes. A second rater was used to establish reliability. A primary theme was a word or phrase that was mentioned by at least 62.5% of the participants.

Across the interviews, 19 themes were identified under the six research questions: (a) close supervision, (b) alternative pathways, (c) fostering a sense of belonging, (d) safety prevention programs, (e) curriculum aligned K-12, (f) using technology to improve results, (g) early identification and support of at-risk students, (h) shared accountability, (i) focus on individual student progress, (j) rigorous curriculum, (k) leadership development, (l) collaboration and sharing of best practices, (m) common assessments, (n) data-driven instruction, (o) focused collaboration, (p) professional learning communities, (q) connecting parents to school, (r) strong collaboration between school and community, and (s) transparency. Interview excerpts were used to provide examples of how each of these primary strategies were operationalized.

Implications for practice were presented for education leaders, community partners, parents, and policymakers. Overall, these implications centered on shared accountability, collaboration, support, common goal setting, communication, and transparency. Recommendations for future research also was provided, including replicating the study with a larger sample, in a rural environment, and among different cultural groups; studying some of the strategies repeatedly identified in this study more in-depth to understand effective implementation; and longitudinal tracking of students

identified as at-risk to understand what they most positively respond to in terms of school engagement.

Through this study, a single strategy was not identified as the method for increasing graduation rates, but a collection of strategies were identified. These strategies are showing promising results despite being implemented in environments with environmental factors that have been shown to impede progress, such as poverty, diversity, and larger school district sizes. While it is important to understand the impact of high school dropout on individuals and societies in order to create a sense of urgency for this issue, it is imperative that more studies, similar to the present study, be conducted to identify what strategies are working. Only through these types of studies, can we begin to identify and replicate promising strategies to address this critical issue.

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APPENDIX A

Interview Protocol

Interview Protocol Project: Exceeding Expectations: Key Strategies to Increase High School Graduation Rates

Time of interview:

Date:

Position of interviewee:

1. Introductory Comments

1. Thank interviewee for their participation in the interview process
2. Review consent form (confidentiality, confirm participation is voluntary)
3. Explain interview process, including recording and note-taking
4. Ask for questions

2. **Purpose of the study:** The purpose of this study is to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study will examine the practices in five school districts in CA that are exceeding expected graduation rates.

3. Questions:

1. How do the high schools in your district promote a safe environment?
2. How do the high schools in your district support learning?
3. How do the high schools in your district create high expectations for students?
4. How do the high schools in your district ensure effective leadership at all levels?
5. How do the high schools in your district use data for decision-making?
6. How do the high schools in your district monitor student performance?
7. How do the high schools in your district promote collaboration between teachers and administrators?
8. How do the high schools in your district develop and maintain parent support?
9. How do the high schools in your district develop and maintain high levels of community support?
10. Is there anything else you would like to add?

11. Closing Comments

1. Thank the interviewee for participating in the interview process
2. Review the process that will be used to verify the transcription.
3. Ask for questions

APPENDIX B

Expert Review Panel Letter

Name and title
Organization
Address

Dear Expert:

Thank you for your willingness to participate on a panel of experts validating the interview questions I will be using in my dissertation. The purpose of this validation is to ensure that the questions appropriately tie to the research questions of the study and will allow me to collect data to address the purpose of the study.

The purpose of this study is to identify key strategies for increasing high school graduation rates. This study will examine the practices in five school districts in CA that are exceeding expected graduation rates. These key strategies will be explored through interviews with leaders in each of these school districts. For the purposes of this study, a leader is defined as the superintendent, assistant superintendent, instructional leader, or board member of the district.

Based on your expertise, I am requesting that you evaluate the interview questions for clarity and for relevance to the research questions. Enclosed you will find a review form to evaluate the questions. Next to each question is a rating scale where you will rate the questions according to the degree of relevance to the research questions. A rating of “1” means that the question is “relevant” to the research question identified, a rating of “2” indicates that the question is “not relevant” to the research question identified and should be deleted, and a rating of “3” means the question “needs modification.” A space is provided for suggested modifications. Additional space is also provided on the review form for any overall comments or suggestions.

I look forward to your feedback.

Sincerely,

APPENDIX C

Expert Panel Review Form

Please circle the appropriate number in the rating scale for each item: (1) Relevant, (2) Not Relevant, or (3) Needs Modification.

Research Question	Interview Question (s)	Rating 1. Relevant 2. Not Relevant 3. Needs Modification
What are the key strategies for providing a safe and learning environment?	How do the high schools in your district promote a safe environment?	1 2 3 Modify as follows:
	How do the high schools in your district support learning?	1 2 3 Modify as follows:
What are the key strategies for developing a culture of high expectations for all students?	How do the high schools in your district create high expectations for students?	1 2 3 Modify as follows:
What are the key strategies for ensuring effective leadership at all levels?	How do the high schools in your district ensure effective leadership at all levels?	1 2 3 Modify as follows:
What are the key strategies for data-driven decision making and monitoring of student performance?	How do the high schools in your district use data for decision-making?	1 2 3 Modify as follows:
	How do the high schools in your district monitor student performance?	1 2 3 Modify as follows:
What are the key strategies for ensuring strong collaboration between teachers and administrators?	How do the high schools in your district promote collaboration between teachers and administrators?	1 2 3 Modify as follows:
What are the key strategies for maintaining high levels of parent and community support and engagement?	How do the high schools in your district develop and maintain parent support?	1 2 3 Modify as follows:
	How do the high schools in your district develop and maintain high levels of community support?	1 2 3 Modify as follows:

APPENDIX D

Consent Form

Date

Participant

Address

My name is Shannon Dick and I am a doctoral student in organizational leadership at Pepperdine University, Graduate School of Education and Psychology, under the supervision of Dr. L. Hyatt. My research focus is high-school graduation rates. According to the U.S. Department of Education, each year, one in four students do not complete high school on time or earn a diploma. Overall, young people who drop out are twice as likely as graduates to be unemployed; three times as likely to live in poverty; eight times more likely to wind up in prison; and twice as likely to become the parent of a child who drops out of school. This study will examine the practices used by five school districts in CA that are exceeding expected graduation rates. I am conducting this research in partial fulfillment of the requirements for a dissertation.

You have been selected to participate in this study because you are a leader in a school district that was identified in a recent publication as a district that is exceeding expected graduation rates. Your participation in the interview process is voluntary. As a study participant, you will be asked to do the following:

1. Participate in an interview that will last approximately one hour. The questions for this interview will be provided to you in advance of the interview and the interview date and time will be scheduled at your convenience. The interview questions will explore how the high schools in your district promote a safe environment, support learning, create high expectations for students, ensure effective leadership at all levels, use data for decision-making, monitor student performance, promote collaboration between teachers and administrators, develop and maintain parent support, and develop and maintain high levels of community support. You have the

right to refuse to answer any of the interview questions.

2. After the interview, you will be sent a transcript of the entire interview. You will be asked to verify if the transcript is correct. Any inaccuracies may be corrected at that time.

In order to ensure full disclosure, more information outlining the specifics of the study are provided below:

1. Your participation in this study is voluntary.
2. With your permission below, the interview will be recorded and transcribed verbatim. After the interview, a copy of the transcription will be sent to you in order to verify the accuracy of the recording. No names or identifying information will be placed on the transcription. Interview notes, audio tapes, and consent forms will be maintained in a locked cabinet. Only the researcher will have access to the cabinet. After transcription, the tapes will be destroyed and the interview notes will be shredded.
3. During the interview process, I will be taking notes. These notes will be shredded after transcription.
4. Confidentiality will be maintained during the writing process. No data will be ascribed to an interviewee or school district.
5. The information provided during the interview process will be published in a dissertation.
6. The potential risk of this study is minimal. Discomfort associated with this study is no more than that experienced during the normal course of a day.
7. There is no monetary compensation for participation.
8. Although you may not directly benefit, a potential benefit of participating is to provide information that may help other school districts focused on increasing high-school graduation rates.
9. You can withdraw from the study at any point.
10. A copy of this informed consent form will be provided to you.
11. I am required to keep the information collected for this study in a secure manner for at least three years. After the interview notes and transcriptions are no longer required for research purposes, the information will be destroyed.

12. At the end of this study, a summary of the findings will be available upon request. If you wish to receive a summary of the findings, please check the box provided below the signature line below.

By signing below, you agree to voluntarily participate in the study described above.

Thank you for your time.

Sincerely,

Shannon Dick

To be completed by research participant. I hereby consent to participate in the study described above.

Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

I hereby give consent for the interview to be recorded via audiotape.

Name of Participant: _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

I would like to receive a summary of the findings.

I have explained and defined in detail the research procedure in which the subject has consented to participate. Having explained this and answered any questions, I am cosigning this form and accepting this person's consent.

Principal Investigator

Date

APPENDIX E

Permissions

From: Kay Dorko
Sent: Friday, May 18, 2012 7:29 AM
Subject: Education Week Query

Thanks for your interest in Education Week and for contacting the library. In response to your request, you have our permission to use the table and figure below in your dissertation. The attribution line is correct. You may wish to include the following to indicate that permission has been received:

As first appeared in Education Week's Diplomas Count 2010, June 10, 2010. Reprinted and adapted with permission from Editorial Projects in Education.

Please let me know if you have any questions or need additional information.

Best regards,
Kay

Kay Dorko
EPE Library Director
Editorial Projects in Education

APPENDIX F

Permissions

From: Chapman, Chris
Sent: Friday, May 18, 2012 7:20 AM
Subject: RE: permission to reprint tables for dissertation

Hi Shannon,

The materials are in the public domain and are not copyrighted. Please feel free to reproduce and cite. I hope your dissertation is going well. If you end up with robust results and can share, we would be interested in seeing your results.

Sincerely,
Chris

APPENDIX G

IRB Approval

PEPPERDINE UNIVERSITY

Graduate & Professional Schools Institutional Review Board

March 15, 2012

Shannon Dick
30 S. Main St #418
Salt Lake City, UT 84101

Protocol #: E0212D12

Project Title: *Exceeding Expectations: Key Strategies to Increase High School Graduation Rates*

Dear Ms. Dick:

Thank you for submitting your application, *Exceeding Expectations: Key Strategies to Increase High School Graduation Rates*, for exempt review to Pepperdine University's Graduate and Professional Schools Institutional Review Board (GPS IRB). The IRB appreciates the work you and your faculty advisor, Dr. Laura Hyatt, have done on the proposal. The IRB has reviewed your submitted IRB application and all ancillary materials. Upon review, the IRB has determined that the above entitled project meets the requirements for exemption under the federal regulations (45 CFR 46 - <http://www.nihtraining.com/ohsrsite/guidelines/45cfr46.html>) that govern the protections of human subjects. Specifically, section 45 CFR 46.101(b)(1) states:

(b) Unless otherwise required by Department or Agency heads, research activities in which the only involvement of human subjects will be in one or more of the following categories are exempt from this policy:

Category (1) of 45 CFR 46.101, research conducted in established or commonly accepted educational settings, involving normal educational practices, such as, research on regular and special education instructional strategies, or research on the effectiveness of or the comparison among instructional techniques, curricula, or classroom management methods.

Your research must be conducted according to the proposal that was submitted to the IRB. If changes to the approved protocol occur, a revised protocol must be reviewed and approved by the IRB before implementation. For any proposed changes in your research protocol, please submit a **Request for Modification Form** to the GPS IRB. Because your study falls under exemption, there is no requirement for continuing IRB review of your project. Please be aware that changes to your protocol may prevent the research from qualifying for exemption from 45 CFR 46.101 and require submission of a new IRB application or other materials to the GPS IRB.

A goal of the IRB is to prevent negative occurrences during any research study. However, despite our best intent, unforeseen circumstances or events may arise during the research. If an unexpected situation or adverse event happens during your investigation, please notify the GPS IRB as soon as possible. We will ask for a complete explanation of the event and your response. Other actions also may be required depending on the nature of the event. Details regarding the timeframe in which adverse events must be reported to the GPS IRB and the appropriate form to be used to report this information can be found in the *Pepperdine University Protection of Human Participants in Research: Policies and Procedures Manual* (see link to "policy material" at <http://www.pepperdine.edu/irb/graduate/>).

Please refer to the protocol number denoted above in all further communication or correspondence related to this approval. Should you have additional questions, please contact me. On behalf of the GPS IRB, I wish you success in this scholarly pursuit.