A comparison of leadership and organizational characteristics of effective alternative high schools with open and restricted enrollments

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A COMPARISON OF LEADERSHIP AND ORGANIZATIONAL CHARACTERISTICS
OF EFFECTIVE ALTERNATIVE HIGH SCHOOLS
WITH OPEN AND RESTRICTED ENROLLMENTS

By

Andrea Mattoon

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A Comparison of Leadership and Organizational Characteristics of Effective Alternative High Schools with Open and Restricted Enrollments

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Andrea Mattoon

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to develop and present a better understanding of the leadership and organizational characteristics of effective public alternative schools.

The two schools examined in this study were selected from a sub-population of schools that were self-identified as “alternative,” considered effective based on a New York State Education Department rating of In Good Standing with regard to graduation rates, and created by public school districts. Both school districts created nontraditional provisions with somewhat different orientations: one focused on a restricted enrollment of at-risk students who had disconnected from school or dropped out (School A) and the other focused on offering a nontraditional learning option for a general student population (School B). An important distinction is that these two alternative schools are different from what we typically consider school reform efforts. The schools were created as new school structures, with the charge to be different from traditional schools.

Through case study methodology, including individual interviews with superintendents, school leaders, and teachers, a key finding is that even though these effective schools took different approaches in their structures, missions, and student populations, their leadership philosophies and practices, and organizational characteristics were quite similar.

Detailed findings provide support for a set of conclusions about leadership and organizational characteristics in effective public alternative schools and schooling. The main conclusions are summarized as: (1) An extended classification of alternative education provisions is needed; (2) Dual emphases on high expectations with extensive individualized academic and personal support is key to effectiveness; (3) Flexibility is essential for student-
centered innovative alternative schools; (4) Relational Trust is essential for effectiveness and sustainability; (5) Choice membership supports engagement and commitment, and ultimately, student learning and school effectiveness; (6) Leadership matters, taking the form of “Keepers of the Flame” and “Sustainers of Innovation”; (7) Context matters, with respect to specific structures adopted for the school community.
Acknowledgements

As I reflect on those who have invested so much into this project, I am overwhelmed with gratefulness and acknowledge that these words of gratitude insufficiently express my appreciation.

First, I hope I have done justice to the schools represented in this dissertation—the superintendents, school leaders, and teachers who I came to truly respect and admire in so many ways. They made this study exciting and kept me motivated.

This dissertation process would most likely never have started without the support of Dr. Eugene Sensel who encouraged me to “go for it” and enroll in the doctoral program. Your dedication to the field of education, and personal mentoring and friendship were a tremendous source of motivation.

To my dissertation committee, Dr. Alan Wagner, Dr. Ray O’Connell, Dr. Hal Lawson, and Dr. Jim Butterworth, thank you for guiding me through this process—offering challenge, expertise, and encouragement when I needed it. I am especially grateful for your collective insight to pivot this study toward a more in-depth examination of these schools. I believe it produced a far better dissertation. Special thanks to Dr. Ray O’Connell for providing guidance and support during the early years, and continuing with this project into retirement.

I am fully aware that I would not have completed this project if it had not been for my committee chair, Dr. Alan Wagner, and my Local Mentor, Paul Marx. Thank you, Dr. Wagner, for never giving up on me, and for always believing in me while offering continual feedback, encouragement, and support. I can’t thank you enough for taking on the chairmanship of this committee and gently guiding this project to completion.
Paul Marx, you have a special gift as a mentor and coach and I am grateful you chose to share it with me. You masterfully respected the free spirit in me while guiding me to completion of a project that requires great discipline and focus. Thank you for investing so much of your time—for the many discussions, debates, and readings—and for never giving up on me or this project, even into retirement.

I want to thank my mother, Katherine, and my father, DeVere (who passed away during the final months of this project), for instilling in me a love for learning, and teaching me to appreciate that which is innovative, creative, and different. I am especially thankful for the strong foundation of faith in God you helped instill in me. I have leaned heavily on it throughout this process for grace and strength to fight the inevitable dissertation-process battles.

Thank you to all my friends and family members who have gone through this journey with me. You dragged me out of the library when I needed it, and provided unconditional love and support during trying times. Special thanks to Paul and Alice Marx for welcoming me into your home for writing retreats, Sarah Conley for ever-present encouragement, and John, Betsy, Christopher, and Gabrielle Mattoon for helping me maintain a balanced life filled with joy and laughter. You are special people and I feel incredibly blessed to have you in my life.

Finally, I hope I have served these two alternative schools, the field of alternative education, and the EAPS Department at the University at Albany well. I also hope that the learnings and insights from this study will make a contribution to the important work of researchers, policymakers, and practitioners who are devoted to helping all students develop the skills and attributes needed to achieve their dreams.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

This study examined the leadership and organizational characteristics of effective alternative high schools in two different contexts, with two different purposes—one (School A) to reconnect at-risk youth; the other (School B) to provide a nontraditional learning environment with the goal of developing global citizens. An examination of districts and school leaders’ philosophies and practices, leadership structures, and the organizational characteristics of each school provided rich data for comparative analyses, leading to a better understanding of why these alternative schools are effective and how their programs and practices have been sustained.

In order to situate these schools within the broader field, a clearer understanding of the concept of “alternative education” is needed. Most researchers and historians cite the 1960s as the beginning of the public alternative school movement. According to Young (1990), during the 1950s and 1960s schools were challenged to provide a more equitable education for students, regardless of their race, ethnicity, or socioeconomic status. Historically, alternative models of education have included Free Schools, Freedom Schools, Open Schools, Schools Without Walls, Schools within Schools, and Magnet Schools with a variety of missions, purposes, and settings such as storefronts, churches, and community buildings. Some of these innovations also incorporated alternatives in philosophies of education including increased community involvement and control, an increased emphasis on individual students and their unique and natural talents and interests (Lange & Sletten 2002, 9-10), and a “repudiation of the notion of one best way to educate all students” (Neumann 1994, 547). In addition to student choices, teachers were given more control over instructional techniques and grading practices, and parents were
given more choices in how and where their children were educated (Lange and Sletten 2002, 9-10).

In the mid-1960s, the alternative education movement was bolstered when President Johnson declared a War on Poverty, created the Great Society Program, and established the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965. This law introduced the Title I program that provided significant amounts of government money for K-12 schools with large numbers of low-income students, and the Title III Program opened the door to educational innovations. New government support, along with funding from large foundations interested in investing in innovations and school reform efforts, created unprecedented opportunities for states and school districts (Raywid 1981, 551). With few guidelines on best practices or a well-defined purpose or concept of “alternative education,” provisions flourished in number and diversity. According to Barr (1981, 571), by the early 1980s there were more than 150 different types of schools under the label “alternative.”

In general, alternative education programs and schools are designed to meet the unique needs of students in an alternative way. By definition, they are unconventional, different from traditional. But, unlike any other educational provision, the term alternative education has evoked a wide range of delineations—encompassing varied philosophies of whom alternative education is for, and how and where it is provided.

According to Lehr and Lange (2003, 59), “A common definition of alternative schools accepted by practitioners, administrators, researchers, and policymakers does not currently exist.” Without a well-defined model, approach or standard for alternative education, individual states have adopted a wide range of definitions and laws guiding their alternative provisions.
The extent of variations in these definitions was captured through a review of state and federal websites conducted by Porowski, O’Conner, and Luo (2014). Louisiana’s definition of alternative education states,

Alternative education programs may mean programs designed to offer variations of traditional instructional programs and strategies to help unmotivated, unsuccessful, or disruptive students remain in school and obtain a high school diploma. Alternative programs may include but are not limited to programs that hold students to strict standards of behavior in highly structured and controlled environments, sometimes referred to as ‘boot camps,’ ‘police schools,’ or ‘court schools.’ (Porowski, O’Conner, and Luo 2014, B-3)

In comparison, the California Department of Education’s website states their definition of alternative education as,

An alternative school is a school or separate in-school class group designed to maximize student opportunities to develop self-reliance, initiative, kindness, spontaneity, resourcefulness, courage, creativity, responsibility, and joy; recognize that the best learning takes place when the student learns because of a desire to learn; maintain a learning situation that maximizes student self-motivation and encourages the students in his/her own time to follow his/her own interests, which may be conceived independently or result from teacher presentations of choices of learning projects; maximize continuous, permanent opportunities for teachers, parents, and students to cooperatively develop the learning process and its subject matter; maximize the opportunity for students, teachers, and parents to continuously react to the changing world, including but not limited to the community where the schools is located. (Porowski, O’Conner, and Luo 2014, B-1)

These two examples offer a snapshot of the significantly different perspectives and philosophies of alternative education and at-risk students. Other state definitions include variations in whom alternative education is for (e.g. restricted enrollment of at-risk students, and/or open enrollment for general students), where it is provided (e.g. in-school suspension, homeschooling, charter schools, correspondence schools, incarceration/detention facilities, programs within a school, separate location), and how it is provided (e.g. traditional or innovative curriculum and instruction).
To address this lack of a uniform structure or set of arrangements for alternative education, Raywid (1994) developed a typology that has provided researchers and practitioners with a way to differentiate programs: Type I – Innovative Schools of Choice; Type II – Last-Chance Programs; and Type III – Remediation / Rehabilitation Programs. Raywid (1994) further distinguished programs according to their primary focus on one of two general philosophies—to fix the school (Type I) by providing a nontraditional school structure, curriculum, and/or instructional techniques; or to fix the student (Type II, III) by providing an alternative program to improve behavior or increase academic achievement. These policy definitions and typologies, while still varied and problematic, have enabled researchers to broaden their inquiries from individual case studies to state and national comparisons and analyses.

This dissertation study was conducted in New York State (NYS) where according to the New York State Education Department (NYSED) the objective of alternative education is “To increase [a] student’s personal assets through a customized learning environment that is responsive to the unique needs of the students.” The intent of alternative education in NYS is to provide

students with an additional pathway to high school completion. The prevailing philosophy for these pathways is that a one-size approach often leaves some children behind because students are motivated differently and possess individual learning and thinking styles.

NYS public alternative education includes any nontraditional environment that provides comprehensive elementary, middle or secondary curriculum. Mastery of learning standards and attainment of a high school diploma are achieved through a learner-centered program structure, multiple learning opportunities, frequent student performance review and feedback, and innovative use of community and school resources to support youth development. (Alternative Education: Making a Difference, 2010)

The document, Alternative Education: Making a Difference, was last updated in 2010. More recently, a search on the NYSED website for “alternative education” leads to the
“Alternative and Incarcerated Education” webpage. There, the purpose of alternative education is described as, “options for students who are at risk of dropping out of school to remain engaged in an alternative learning environment that focuses on their particular skills, abilities and learning styles. Alternative education programs have for decades provided additional pathway[s] for students to complete their secondary education and transition to a post-secondary or career option.”

Historically, the purpose of alternative education in NYS seems to emphasize two paths—schools/programs providing an innovative alternative to the traditional setting, curriculum or instructional techniques; and schools/programs focused on helping at-risk students increase academic achievement, improve behavior and social skills, or receive the support necessary to stay in school until completion. This dissertation research included an in-depth study of two alternative schools—one from each “path”—and found that the two paths are not necessarily divergent. An alternative school can focus on at-risk students and manifest innovative leadership and organizational characteristics.

**Current Research Emphasis**

The number of alternative education provisions nationally continues to increase, and their purposes continue to locate between innovation and detention, “fix the school” and “fix the student,” and a “focus on development” and a “focus on prevention.” Furthermore, research in the field is still “in the weeds” with regard to current practices and levels of effectiveness within these different types of alternative provisions. Most recently, school reform efforts have gained increasing interest from entrepreneurs, foundations, school districts, and policy makers. Charter schools nationwide, city-wide urban school reform efforts including small schools in New York City and Chicago, the high school redesign initiative in Chicago, and continuation schools
throughout California are just a few examples of different types of system-wide efforts aimed at “turning around” failing schools or other efforts to help students achieve academic success.

Perhaps the most current, in-depth longitudinal study was conducted by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR) of a city-wide school reform initiative. From this study, Bryk et al. (2010, 45-46) developed the Framework of Essential Supports for School Improvement, in which five supports were identified: Instructional Guidance, Parent-Community Ties, Student-Centered Learning Climate, and Teachers’ Capacity and Commitment. Leadership was identified as the fifth Essential Element and considered the “driver for change.”

**Purpose of Study**

While research on school reform efforts is necessary to better understand the complexities of changing, reforming, or improving a school or system, the body of school reform research is not directly applicable to all of what falls under the definition of “alternative education.” For example, the two schools in this dissertation study are not school “reform” or “transform” efforts. They are not part of failing school districts. They are stand-alone schools that were created by their public school districts as nontraditional alternative educational options.

Rigorous studies of the current landscape of alternative education are few and limited, but it seems reasonable to expect that the general factors emerging in studies of traditional school effectiveness, and of school reform efforts, would provide an adequate lens through which to examine the potentially important characteristics of alternative programs. Therefore, the purpose of this study was to identify the leadership and organizational characteristics of effective alternative high schools, using the Framework of Essential Supports developed by Bryk et al. (2010).
Leadership for Alternative Education

Much of the current research on educational leadership focuses on leadership in traditional settings or “turn-around” settings where a leader is given the specific task of reforming or changing a school. The words “transformational” and “change agent” are oftentimes used in these studies, along with broader concepts of distributed leadership and shared leadership. But, there is very little research on leadership for alternative schools, especially with regard to whether leadership characteristics differ between types of alternative education provisions pursuing different philosophies and serving different student populations.

Research Questions

While the broad inquiry of this study was to better understand the relationship between leaders’ philosophies and practices, leadership structures, and organizational characteristics of effective alternative high schools, the following questions based on the Framework of Essential Supports developed by Bryk et al. (2010) more specifically guide this study:

1. How do alternative schools develop parent and community ties, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers?

2. How is the professional capacity of alternative education teachers developed, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers?

3. How do alternative schools create a student-centered learning climate, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers?

4. How is instructional guidance provided in alternative schools, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers?
5. How do alternative schools provide student support services, as perceived by principals and teachers?

6. What is the relationship between the presence of the CCSR *Framework of Essential Supports* (Leadership & Organizational supports) and alternative school context?

7. What are the leadership characteristics of principals in effective alternative schools, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers?

**Importance of Studying Alternative Education**

Four primary reasons anchor the importance of this study: (1) The number of alternative education provisions in the United States continues to increase, (2) Alternative schools have been found to be an effective avenue to increasing graduation rates, (3) Alternative schools serve as an incubator for innovation and general school improvement, (4) There are significant gaps in research on certain types of alternative schools.

**Prevalence of Alternative Education**

In a nationwide survey for the National Center for Education Statistics and the U.S. Department of Education, Keaton (2012) identified different types of public elementary and secondary schools operating in the United States during the 2010-11 schoolyear. According to Keaton (2012, B-1), the *Common Core of Data* defines an alternative education school as, “A public elementary/secondary school that (1) addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, (2) provides nontraditional education, (3) serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or (4) falls outside the categories of regular, special education, or vocational education.” Of interest, while it is common to consider anything other than “Regular” as “Alternative,” Keaton (2012) created separate categories for the more well-defined alternatives
(e.g. Charter, Magnet, Vocational) leaving “Alternative Education” as a sort of miscellaneous category. It is within this miscellaneous Alternative Education category that both of the schools in this study would fall.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Total # of Schools Nationwide</th>
<th>Regular</th>
<th>Alternative Education</th>
<th>Charter</th>
<th>Magnet</th>
<th>Special Education</th>
<th>Vocational Education</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>98,817</td>
<td>88,929</td>
<td>6,197</td>
<td>5,274</td>
<td>2,722</td>
<td>2,206</td>
<td>1,485</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Source: Keaton 2012, 6-7)

Two interesting findings emerged from this nation-wide study: (1) Alternative education is the second largest type of school; (2) When comparing the percentages of change within each of four types (Regular, Special Education, Vocational Education, and Alternative Education), Alternative Education had the highest percentage of new schools opened during the 2010-11 school year (204; 3.29%) and more “non-operating” Alternative Education schools (760) than Special Education (82) or Vocational Education (17). The “non-operating” alternatives included 364 that had closed and 348 that were “inactive,” meaning they were “closed temporarily and expected to reopen within 3 years” (Keaton 2012, 6). These statistics serve as an indicator of the variability of alternative school provisions in comparison with other types of schools. One could suspect that new schools were created because there was an identified need, but why were so many inactive or closed? One could speculate several, possibly overlapping reasons: the problem was resolved (unlikely), the school was unsuccessful in accomplishing its mission, or the school was unable to be sustained (due to weakening financial circumstances or weakening support from staff or in the community).
At-risk to Graduate

According to Kena et al. (2015, xxvi), the graduation rate for public high school students who graduated on time with a regular diploma was 81% during the 2011-2012 school year. This was a 1% increase from the previous year. The 19% who are at high risk of dropping out or ultimately failing to graduate face a lifetime of challenges and barriers to finding and maintaining living wage employment. According to Kena (2015, xxi), the median annual earnings for 25-34 year olds who do not complete high school is $23,900, some $7,000 lower than those who complete high school, and less than half of what those with at least a bachelor's degree earn. Similarly, the unemployment rate for individuals 25-34 years old who do not complete high school is 13.7%, some 3 percentage points higher than those who complete high school, and over three times greater than those who earn at least a bachelor's degree.

According to Lange and Sletten (2002, 2), “educators believe that alternative education is one important answer to meeting the needs of disenfranchised youth.” However, “there is still very little consistent, wide-ranging evidence of their effectiveness or even an understanding of their characteristics” (Lange and Sletten 2002, 2).

Gaps in Research

Several gaps in alternative education research exist: a lack of knowledge of alternative educational provisions in “average” districts (not high poverty urban or rural areas); a lack of understanding the leadership characteristics of effective alternative school principals and of effective district superintendents who oversee these schools; and a lack of understanding the differences (if any) in leadership and organizational characteristics for different types of effective alternative provisions.
Substantial research efforts have been devoted to evaluating the characteristics and effectiveness of large urban school reform efforts. Far fewer studies have focused on “average” need and resource capacity districts. Almost half of school districts in New York State fall into this category.

According to the New York State Education Department (NYSED), school districts are placed within one of six “Need/Resource Capacity Categories” based on “a measure of a district’s ability to meet the needs of its students with local resources . . . [It] is the ratio of the estimated poverty percentage (expressed in standard score form) to the Combined Wealth Ratio (expressed in standard score form).”

An examination of 2009-2010 data shows that, of 728 school districts in New York State, an estimated 49% were classified as average need/resource capacity districts. Of the remainder, about 20% were high need/resource capacity rural districts; a little more than 10% were high need/resource capacity city and urban-suburban high need districts; and a little less than 20% were low need/resource districts. Even though there are fewer high need/resource capacity large city and urban-suburban districts, studies focused on these districts are warranted as they are larger in size and account for a large share of students who struggle academically. However, as noted, almost half of the districts are “average” and so present challenges that differ from the more-often researched urban and rural poor districts.

Leadership Characteristics of Alternative Education Administrators

From school effectiveness research as well as more fundamental research on organizations and their effectiveness, we know that leadership plays a key role. Currently, rigorous research on leadership structures, and leaders’ philosophies and practices in effective
alternative schools is limited; and studies comparing those characteristics across different types of provisions are few in number. The role of leaders in alternative schools is especially important as they are charged with creating change and sustaining the change. A different set of skills may be needed for principals and district leaders responsible for such schools, when compared to the skills needed by school principals, and further by “reform” leaders in traditional school settings. Considering the unique nature of alternative schools, an exploration of the alignment of the leader’s personal philosophy with the alternative school’s philosophy and culture is an area of interest.

**Significance of the Study**

While the number of alternative provisions has grown and a body of research has accumulated, we know little about the comparison of leadership and organizational characteristics of different types of effective schools. These alternative schools are departures from traditional schooling, yet designed and sustained by public school districts to meet an identified need. They are intended to offer learning options for students who choose to pursue a nontraditional setting (innovation), and/or learning options for those not successful in the traditional school environment (at-risk).

The significance of this study is that it represents a contribution to the broader search for what works in alternative education (and how those findings might apply more generally in education) leading to increased academic success for all students.
Chapter 2: Literature Review

Introduction

The following review of extant literature on alternative education and educational leadership provides the substantive basis for this dissertation study and is divided into two main parts: a review of the concept of alternative education—including an overview of the diverse purposes for nontraditional educational provisions, and research on practices and effectiveness; and a review of relevant research on educational leadership and its application in alternative education.

Raywid (1982) conducted one of the first national studies of alternative education, surveying over 1,100 alternative schools located in cities or towns with a population of at least 50,000. At the time, most alternative schools were small, with over half enrolling fewer than 100 students, but a sizeable number were also quite large—seventeen percent of schools (mostly urban) enrolled more than 500 students (Raywid 1982, 12). Seventy-nine percent enrolled students by choice and 85% hired teachers by choice (Raywid 1982, 16).

With regard to oversight and accountability, Raywid (1982, 17) was surprised to find that “alternative schools obtain enough independence so that staff can design and carry out their own vision of schooling.” Raywid considered this “a remarkable finding at a time when most educators report feelings of powerlessness” (Raywid 1982, 17). Furthermore, 20% of schools stated they had no administrator; their leadership structure was more distributed or shared with teachers (and students) playing a significant role in decision-making (Raywid 1982, 17).
Diversions & Contradictions within the Alternative Education Movement

One of the most interesting findings from Raywid’s study was the diversity of types of alternative provisions that had developed within the first fifteen years of the movement. Alternatives varied significantly in their purpose and practices—in some ways contradicting the original tenets of the alternative education movement. According to Raywid (1982, 11), “some of the types we learned about would not be considered alternatives . . . For instance, 13% of our respondents identified themselves as remedial or corrective programs to which students are temporarily assigned.” According to Raywid (1982), these characteristics not only expanded the definition of alternative education, they challenged the original purpose and general practices associated with the movement, stating, “most [original] alternative school definitions emphasize choice as crucial; most assume long-term, not temporary affiliation, with the possibility of remaining in the alternative until graduation; and many definitions stipulate that the alternative reflect a population representative of the district rather than a special group deficient in some regard” (Raywid 1982,11).

At the time of the survey, alternative schools were most prevalent in California, New York, Washington, Michigan, Illinois, and Oregon. Newer alternatives had started in southern states including Florida and Texas, but they tended to be large, and a number were punitive in nature and included structures similar to in-school suspension—quite different from the innovative schools of choice developed in other parts of the country. Raywid (1982, 8-9) made the distinction that these schools were “alternatives to suspension, not to other types of education,” and yet they still fell under the label of “alternative education.”

Raywid (1982) believed this shift began by the early 1980s as many innovative alternative provisions had become well-established within their districts—showing great success
and leading to a better understanding of best practices. But, Raywid (1982, 28) also believed there was an “ironic but inevitable counterpart of the success”:

as alternative schools have demonstrated their effectiveness and potential, they have been sought by a number of groups attempting to solve such disparate problems as segregation, juvenile crime, school violence and vandalism, and youth unemployment. The programs established in response to these problems have almost come to outnumber the programs established in the interests of providing better education—with two important negative consequences.

First, not all of the alternative schools launched for such purposes have kept educational aims uppermost—or pursued very sound educational practice . . . Many of these have quite predictably proved rather ineffective. Perhaps of even greater long-term consequence, looking to alternatives as the way to handle the problem students has tended to link the alternatives idea to ‘special needs’ populations. This, in turn, has not only brought stigma; but it has also pressed alternatives into service as a safety valve protecting the ‘regular’ school and keeping it intact! It is ironic that a school type established to show the viability of diversifying all education has in effect functioned in some places to maintain the ‘one best system’ arrangement. (Raywid 1982, 28-29)

This concern was shared by Barr (1981, 571) who believed that, “At their best, alternative schools have functioned as an exciting laboratory where unique and often daring programs are conducted and evaluated. At their worst, alternative schools represent some of the most unfortunate tendencies toward social tracking, political manipulation, and educational hucksterism.”

A little over fifteen years after the alternative education movement gained momentum, the lack of a clear, agreed-upon definition of its purpose, and inconsistent guidelines for practices had created an atmosphere where provisions included under the term “alternative education” were not only diverse, they were contradictory in basic core values. As a result, Raywid (1982, 29) suggested that, “A major challenge appears to be bringing about a merger between the alternatives and options movements in education . . . perhaps an abandonment of the alternatives label might be a good starting point, in light of its negative connotations for many, and its
increasingly confused use to cover everything from schools of choice to arrangements some have called ‘soft jails.’”

*A Nation at Risk—If Traditional is Insufficient, What’s the Alternative?*

As the alternative education movement was going through an identity crisis of sorts, President Reagan had appointed a commission to evaluate the condition of education in the United States. In 1983, the often-cited *A Nation at Risk* report was published sounding the alarm that our public education system was not adequately preparing an educated society or a strong workforce, and the future of our country was in jeopardy. This resulted in an increased emphasis on at-risk students, school reform, and a general yearning for the answer to, “If traditional education is insufficient, what is the alternative?” As the country was searching for educational solutions, the alternative school movement was gathering evidence of effectiveness, but with great diversity in purposes, practices, and levels of effectiveness, their voices were muffled by the lack of a clear understanding of alternative education and general acceptance of its role within the field of education.

According to Bauman (1998, 259), during the late 1980s and early 1990s, many alternative education models shifted away from innovation and creativity and became a popular educational term for schools or programs geared primarily for students who were not successful in the traditional school setting. By the mid-1990s, the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education stated that, “Concern among the public, educators, and policymakers about violence, weapons, and drugs on elementary and secondary school campuses, balanced with concern about sending disruptive and potentially dangerous students ‘out on the streets,’ has spawned an increased interest in alternative schools and programs” (U.S. Department of Education 1996). (as cited in Kleiner, Porch, and Farris 2002, iii)
In a nationwide study of state education policies and legislation regarding alternative education, Lehr, Tan, and Ysseldyke (2009) found that alternative education in most states was for at-risk students in nontraditional settings. “Just over half of the states described alternative schools as educational settings designed to prevent students from dropping out of school. More than a third of the states indicated that alternative schools in their states served as a disciplinary consequence for students” (Lehr, Tan, and Ysseldyke 2009, 24). Confirming Raywid’s (1982) and Barr’s (1981) concerns expressed over twenty years earlier, Lehr, Tan, and Ysseldyke (2009, 26) found that, “the use of expulsion or suspension as a criteria for enrollment in alternative schools does beg the question as to whether alternative education will be or is being used as a ‘holding tank’ for those who cause disruptions in traditional schools, or if they are educational entities in their own right. Questions about the extent to which alternative programs are increasingly being used as ‘dumping grounds’ also emerge.”

Prevalence of Alternative Education Provisions

National statistics, gathered annually by the National Center for Education Statistics at the U.S. Department of Education, provide a picture of historical growth of different types of elementary and secondary public schools (not programs) in the United States.

Perhaps surprising to many, “alternative education” has been the second largest type of public education since these reports became public—second only to “regular” public schools.
Number and Type of Public Elementary and Secondary Schools in the U.S.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th># of Regular Public Schools</th>
<th># of Special Education Schools</th>
<th># of Vocational Schools</th>
<th># of Alternative Schools</th>
<th># of Charter Schools</th>
<th># of Magnet Schools</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1993-1994</td>
<td>79,369</td>
<td>1,639</td>
<td>342</td>
<td>2,271</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1998-1999</td>
<td>83,642</td>
<td>1,974</td>
<td>1,077</td>
<td>4,181</td>
<td>-</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>85,910</td>
<td>1,771</td>
<td>347</td>
<td>4,788</td>
<td>3,181</td>
<td>-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>88,801</td>
<td>2,289</td>
<td>1,409</td>
<td>6,207</td>
<td>4,694</td>
<td>3,021</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2013-2014</td>
<td>90,791</td>
<td>2,109</td>
<td>1,414</td>
<td>6,497</td>
<td>6,465</td>
<td>3,254</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Sources: Hoffman (1995); Hoffman (2000); Hoffman and Sable (2006); Chen (2010); Glander (2015))

In addition to the annual data collected on different types of schools, two reports were published specifically on public alternative provisions for at-risk students: *Public Alternative Schools and Programs for Students At Risk of Education Failure: 2000-01* (Kleiner, Porch, and Farris 2002), and *Alternative Schools and Programs for Public School Students At Risk of Educational Failure: 2007-08* (Carver and Lewis 2010) that provide detailed nationwide information about alternative schools serving at-risk students.

These two reports, published eight years apart, focus solely on alternative provisions for at-risk students and indicate a significant increase in the number of districts operating at least one alternative school or program—from 39% during the 2000-2001 schoolyear to 64% in 2007-2008 (Kleiner, Porch, and Farris 2002; Carver and Lewis 2010). Furthermore, during the 2007-2008 schoolyear, 37% of alternatives were located within a traditional school, and one-third of alternative provisions were at capacity. Seventy-five percent of districts with alternatives stated that students were placed based on a “Recommendation of regular school staff,” and 41% indicated “Student request” (Carver and Lewis 2010).

While these reports provide a glimpse into the field of alternative education specifically for at-risk students, they do not provide in-depth information on their characteristics or
effectiveness. To gain a better understanding of what works within this large subsector of our education system, a better understanding of the different types of provisions is needed.

**Typology of Alternative Education Provisions**

Alternative education has, at its heart, *change*—change for students and/or schools, depending on the *purpose* of the school. For this study, the term *purpose* means more than improving learning outcomes. It is intended to convey an understanding of the philosophy and culture of the alternative provision.

Raywid (1994) summarized the two disparate purposes in alternative education stating,

two enduring consistencies have characterized alternative schools from the start: they have been designed to respond to a group that appears not to be optimally served by the regular program, and consequently they have represented varying degrees of departure from standard school organization, programs, and environments.

The first of these traits has often linked alternative schools with unsuccessful students—with those who by virtue of being ‘disadvantaged,’ ‘marginal,’ or ‘at risk’ cannot or will not succeed in a regular program. The second trait has often linked alternatives to innovation and creativity in both practice and organization. And alternative schools have varied according to which of these two traits has loomed the largest for them. (Raywid 1994, 26)

One of the distinctions Raywid makes is between alternatives focused on at-risk students and those that are innovative. However, it seems a more appropriate comparison would be between an open enrollment for students and a restricted enrollment (for at-risk students), and whether the philosophy and culture of the school has a traditional or innovative orientation.

In an effort to better define and differentiate alternatives, Raywid (1994) identified three types of provisions: Type I (Programs of Choice)—that are popular to students due to their innovative philosophy and culture. The goal is to make schooling both “challenging and fulfilling.” Type II (Last Chance Programs)—where students are typically mandated to attend as
a last chance before they are expelled from the traditional school setting. The goal of these programs is behavior modification, primarily utilizing traditional curricula and instructional techniques. Type III (Remediation Programs)—are for students in need of improved academic, social, and/or emotional skills. The goal of these programs is to remediate or rehabilitate students and transfer them back to their traditional schools.

Raywid’s typology has been the most widely used by researchers and policymakers searching for a way to distinguish between different types of alternatives. However, a review of the literature indicates that many alternatives are considered “hybrids” by fitting into more than one category. Recognizing this, Raywid (1994) further distinguished schools by their core philosophy—Type I schools focus on “Fixing the School” by providing an alternative/nontraditional school structure, curriculum, and/or instructional techniques. These schools believe the “difficulties may be explained by the school-student match;” Type II and III schools focus on “Fixing the Student” by providing an alternative program to improve behavior or increase academic achievement. These schools believe the “problems lie within the individual” (Raywid 1994, 28).

Quinn and Poirier (2006, 1) later added that,

Advocates of both the ‘broken child’ and ‘broken system’ philosophies do agree on the need for alternatives to traditional educational settings. However, philosophy dictates the structure and the goals of these alternatives. If the philosophy is that the student needs to be somehow changed, alternative programs seek to reform the student. If the philosophy is that the system needs change, the alternative program provides innovative curriculum and instructional strategies to better meet the needs of these students. This difference in philosophy has [led] to decades of controversy over what alternative education should look like and who should be sent there.

In 2002, the New York State Education Department (NYSED) surveyed Boards of Cooperative Educational Services (BOCES) and public school districts in the state requesting
information on alternative education provisions. All BOCES and 179 (65%) of upstate New York districts responded to the survey. Results were reported in the *New York State Alternative Education: “State of the Practice 2003”* as follows:

| NYS Alternative Education Programs Classified by Raywid’s Typology | Percentage of Students Enrolled |
|---|---|---|
| **Type of Program** | **Type I—Choice** | **Type II—Last Chance** | **Type III—At-risk (Remediation)** |
| High School Diploma | 21% | 10% | 69% |
| High School Equivalency | 6% | 30% | 64% |

This survey provides a snapshot of alternative education programs in upstate New York in 2002, and is the most recent published report of alternative provisions offered. The original survey questions are not available for review or replication, and it is unclear how programs were classified as Type I, II, or III or how hybrid programs were classified if they did not fit into a specific type.

Other researchers have also used Raywid’s typology to study state-wide alternatives, including Hosley (2003) who surveyed administrators, teachers and counselors in alternative programs across the state of Pennsylvania. He found that even though the state definition of alternative education was most consistent with Type II programs, and “It [was] clear that type 2-Discipline program components [were] common to most programs . . . it [was] equally clear from the survey that components of the academic and therapeutic approaches [were also] included in programs” (Hosley 2003, 17). This raises questions about whether programs can be
Research on Alternative Education


To better understand how “alternative” alternative schools are, and whether they are more or less successful than traditional schools, several researchers have conducted comparison studies with traditional schools. One of the first studies to gain an in-depth look at the complexities of “risk” was conducted by Mann and Gold (1981) who compared students in three alternative schools specifically for delinquent and disruptive students with students in traditional schools who were identified by counselors and administrators as having similar “risk” factors. Students were interviewed three times—at the beginning and end of the school year, and the following fall.

Mann and Gold (1981) identified a couple of key findings: (1) Members of the traditional school community (administrators, teachers, students) tended to have negative perceptions of the alternative schools—as did many of the alternative students at first, but by their second year in the alternative school those perceptions most often changed from negative to positive, (2) Perhaps the most interesting finding from the study was the difference in what Mann and Gold (1981, 8) refer to as “buoyant” and “beset” students. Beset students were identified as those who indicated the highest levels of anxiety or depression at the time of their initial interviews. Mann and Gold (1981, 13-15) found that when comparing the results for buoyant and beset students, the alternative schools were significantly more effective with buoyant students and had only negligible impact on beset students—even though those students expressed sufficiently classified using Raywid’s typology, and provides evidence of the need for additional or better distinctions.
positive attitudes toward the teachers and the school in general. Of interest, the alternative schools were most successful with buoyant students who were most delinquent, suggesting that levels of anxiety and depression were better indicators of success in the alternative schools than students’ level of delinquency. This study provided one of the first insights into the complexities of what we often generically refer to as “risk” within alternative education.

Much more recently, a study conducted by Beken, Williams, Combs, and Slate (2009) evaluated the effectiveness of alternative provisions by comparing math and ELA scores of at-risk students enrolled in traditional high schools with the scores of students enrolled in alternative programs in the state of Texas. Schools in this study included alternative high schools for at-risk students, and traditional high schools with a population of at least 70% of their students considered “at-risk.” This study was conducted for two consecutive years with results indicating that in math and ELA, at-risk students in traditional settings performed significantly higher than students in alternative schools. These findings challenge the body of research showing the effectiveness of alternative education programs. However, further examination of the limitations of Beken, Williams, Combs, and Slate’s (2009) study identified one matter for consideration—without a way to classify degrees of risk, students in the alternative programs with multiple risk factors would receive the same “at-risk” label as students in traditional school settings with only one risk factor. The authors believe that, “The current definition of at-risk in Texas does not differentiate the degree of need, which might be critical in properly serving these students . . . At-risk students who are served in traditional high schools, most likely, meet fewer criteria of the at-risk definition . . . which might explain the differences present in this study” (Beken, Williams, Combs, and Slate 2009, 57).
These studies emphasize the complexity of defining and studying “at-risk” populations of students and the schools who are serving them. Furthermore, they highlight the complexities of measuring the effectiveness of alternative provisions working with students with different types and levels of risk. Aron (2006, 18) added, “Currently there are few rigorous studies (using random assignment, control groups, etc.) that examine student outcomes and program effectiveness of alternative education. Clearly more research is needed in this area, especially given that accountability and outcome measures used in schools may not be sufficient for alternative education.”

In education, “hard” data are typically used to measure effectiveness (e.g. test scores, graduation rates), but decades of research on student motivation and academic resilience have pointed to “softer” measures that oftentimes lead to effectiveness, including feeling a connection to a school (a sense of belonging), feeling cared for, and believing the curriculum is relevant and interesting. Within the field of alternative education, these, along with somewhat “harder” measures including increased attendance and decreased discipline referrals, are oftentimes predictors of eventual success or improvement.

One of the first groundbreaking studies comparing students’ experiences in alternative and traditional schools was conducted by Smith, Gregory, and Pugh (1981) who used Maslow’s hierarchy of needs theory to discover teachers’ and students’ perceptions of how their schools were meeting students’ security needs (e.g. safe and orderly environment), social needs (e.g. a sense of belonging), esteem needs (e.g. believing they “can”), and self-actualization needs (e.g. meaningful personal growth). Seven alternative and six traditional schools across four states that were considered “good” or “very good” were selected for the study. Survey responses were gathered from 459 alternative students and 104 alternative teachers, and compared with survey
responses from 662 traditional students and 379 traditional teachers. Almost all of the traditional schools were larger than the alternative schools, with the exception of one alternative enrolling 1,200 students. Three of the alternative schools had been operating for approximately ten years; six were housed in separate locations, and one was located within a large traditional school. The urbanicity of the schools was diverse, including small towns, and suburban and metropolitan areas. The alternative schools enrolled a significantly higher percentage of minority students, and four of the seven alternatives primarily enrolled “students who had experienced some problems functioning” in traditional schools (Smith, Gregory, and Pugh 1981, 562). While all of the alternative schools were schools of choice, they differed in their philosophy—reflecting the diverse definitions and philosophies of alternative education at that time. Several of the alternative schools had informal, personal cultures; one was a traditional, “back-to-basics” alternative; and two were “highly structured behavior modification programs” (Smith, Gregory, and Pugh 1981, 562).

Smith, Gregory, and Pugh’s (1981) findings were quite interesting. Students and teachers in alternative schools reported significantly higher feelings that students’ social, esteem, and self-actualization needs were being met. Of importance, and somewhat surprising, the difference in student responses in these three areas were so different between alternative and traditional students that when all participants’ scores/ratings were placed on a chart, the bottom boundary of alternative students’ responses didn’t overlap the top boundary for traditional students’. And, there was insignificant overlap between the two groups regarding security needs—indicating no significant difference between alternative and traditional school teachers’ and students’ perceptions that their school was a safe and orderly environment.
This study’s findings are important in several ways: They suggest that school size isn’t imperative to success as one of the larger alternative schools had one of the highest overall scores (Smith, Gregory, and Pugh 1981, 564); Furthermore, variations in school structure, philosophy, teacher tenure, or student mobility could not account for the differences in responses. Of special interest, when comparing the results of informal and highly structured alternative schools, one of the highly structured behavior modification programs had some of the highest scores. Of all the variations in the different types of alternative schools, Smith, Gregory, and Pugh (1981) identified “choice membership” as the main constant—teachers’ and students’ membership in their alternative school was by choice, rather than mandated (Smith, Gregory, and Pugh 1981, 564). However, the authors’ main conclusion that choice membership was a significant factor would have been stronger if the researchers had included some non-choice alternative schools in their sample and conducted comparisons between teachers’ and students’ responses in choice alternatives, non-choice alternatives, and traditional provisions.

Effectiveness of Alternative Education

While there are numerous case studies examining the effectiveness of individual schools, several recent studies of the effectiveness of alternative education provisions have been conducted state-wide. Two of the more recent studies were conducted in Oklahoma and California. In 1996, Oklahoma instituted an Alternative Education Academy Program dedicating millions of dollars annually to help school districts across the state “meet the needs of students who were most at risk of failing to complete high school” (OTAC 2011, 1). This legislation included seventeen broad research-based criteria to promote effectiveness, with local districts given flexibility in how practices were implemented based on their local needs. In 2010, $15.6 million dollars was dedicated to supporting 246 alternative academy programs state-wide
The average annual “per student slot” expenditure for alternative programs was $1,980 in addition to the regular per pupil expenditure provided for all students in the state attending traditional or alternative public schools (OTAC 2011, 34).

According to a report evaluating Oklahoma alternative education programs, in 2010-2011, 854 students who had previously dropped out returned to school and enrolled in alternative education programs across the state. Of those students, 284 graduated in 2011, and 63% had a “positive exit status” meaning they either graduated, earned their GED, or were still enrolled in the alternative program or a traditional school (OTAC 2011, 34). The dropout rate for alternative education programs was 11% (OTAC 2011, i).

According to the author’s review of research, the generally agreed upon estimated cost to society for each student who drops out of school is $200,000, and considering just the number of students who had previously dropped out but returned to school and graduated in 2011 resulted in \((284) \times \$200,000 = \$56,800,000\) in estimated savings to taxpayers in one year (OTAC 2011, 36).

During the 2010-2011 schoolyear, 44% of students in alternative education programs in Oklahoma were referred for academic reasons, 16% truancy, 16% behavior, and 16% “personal circumstances” (OTAC 2011, i). Of interest, the four most often student-reported risk factors included Family issues (49%), Financial issues (28%), Pregnant/parenting teen (14%), and Juvenile justice involved (14%). “Perhaps the most unexpected finding from this data collection was that more than 500 alternative education students were homeless” (OTAC 2011, 10-11).

Incorporated in this evaluation report was a variation of Raywid’s typology to distinguish between Type I programs which they characterized as schools of choice whose “primary purpose
is to provide a curriculum and atmosphere that are conducive to students earning the credits needed for graduation.” And, “Type II programs are characterized as disciplinary programs. Enrollment is not voluntary; these programs are typically alternatives to suspension. Their purpose is to segregate disruptive students” (OTAC 2011, 16). Findings indicate that 44% of alternatives in Oklahoma in 2010-2011 were considered Type I; 3% were Type II, and 53% were too “mixed” to be classified in one or the other (OTAC 2011, 16).

This report’s categorization and findings raise a couple of points of interest. Raywid’s (1994) typology was grouped into two categories instead of the original three, and seemed to exclude alternatives focused on student development, allowing only for alternatives focused on prevention— with Type I having a focus on credit recovery (dropout prevention) and Type II focused on preventing behavior disruptions in the general student population. The inability of over half of the schools to be identified as Type I or II indicates the need for a better typology. Of special interest, the number of Type II programs with the purpose “to segregate disruptive students” increased substantially between 2008-09 (1.6%) and 2009-10 (4%), “primarily due to the implementation of five Type II programs implemented in an urban district. Only one of those programs remained in place in 2010-11” (OTAC 2011, 16).

Overall, based on Oklahoma’s 17 criteria for alternative programs, in 2010-2011, 24% of programs were considered “Notable,” 61% “Satisfactory,” 13% “Marginal/Minimally Compliant,” and 2% “Below Standards” (OTAC 2011, 19). Of special note on the evaluations: three of the four programs rating “Below Standards” had unique circumstances during the year with two not serving any students and a third going through significant changes in location and model of schooling and didn’t require student attendance. The fourth school considered “Below Standards” “served nine different middle school sites and was used by many principals as an in-
school suspension program” (OTAC 2011, 20). One of the more concerning findings was that some of the programs in the “Marginal/Minimally Compliant” grouping lacked the resources necessary to implement a satisfactory program; many were in districts that tried to run an alternative program solely on their Statewide allocations. In some cases, district administrators clearly stated that their goal was mere compliance; they had no interest in running programs that exceeded the minimal requirements set out in law. The Marginal programs had their lowest scores on providing counseling services, providing effective instruction, and designing programs that were appropriate for middle school students to attend. (OTAC 2011, 20)

Funding from the Oklahoma Alternative Education Academy Program was meant to be in addition to the per pupil expenditure received by traditional and alternative schools, not to replace it. These findings emphasize the importance of leadership at the school and district level—especially with regard to alternative education.

When comparing alternative students’ pre and post data with students’ on a waiting list from the previous year, evaluators found,

The alternative education students improved on each of the variables while the comparison students declined or stayed the same. The changes were not only statistically significant but also quite substantial on each variable . . .

Alternative education students made statistically significant and substantial increases in grades and decreases in absences, suspensions, and course failures. The results of these analyses have been consistent year after year: Eligible students who were placed in alternative education programs became less at risk and eligible students who were not enrolled in alternative programs became more at risk. (OTAC 2011, 27)

However, when looking at state required “End-of-Instruction” tests (EOI) that students must pass to graduate from high school, “the overall pass rates remain an area of serious concern” (OTAC 2011, 29). For two of the exams students must pass to graduate, in 2009-10, only 25% of alternative education students passed Algebra I, and 51% passed English II. It should be noted that this percentage for Algebra I was a significant drop from the previous year which was 40%. The author points out that “alternative education programs are faced with two
daunting tasks: (1) dramatically improving the achievement of students who come to them well below grade level, and (2) keeping students motivated and in school even though they have failed EOIs and may despair of ever graduating” (OTAC 2011, 29).

This is one of a few state-wide studies examining the effectiveness of alternative education programs, but there are still significant gaps in our knowledge and understanding of what works best for whom. It is evident through their evaluations that a better distinction of different types of alternative provisions is needed and subsequently a better understanding of the characteristics of those most effective.

Another recent state-wide study of alternative provisions has been published in a series of papers on continuation high schools in California. Similar to other studies of alternative education, Ruiz de Velasco et al. (2008, 1) discovered that “continuation high schools and the students they serve are largely invisible to most Californians” even though they have been operating since a law was passed in 1965 requiring schools with over 100 seniors to offer an alternative option for at-risk students (Ruiz de Velasco et al. 2008, 1). In 2012, there were approximately 519 continuation high schools enrolling over 115,000 students (approximately 14% of all seniors) (Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin 2012, 4).

In a review of the characteristics of students enrolled in continuation high schools, Ruiz de Velasco et al. (2008, 3) discovered that in comparison with traditional high school students, continuation (alternative) students were “three times more likely . . . to be in foster care or living with a relative other than a parent,” almost two and half times more likely to experience high mobility—17% stating they had moved at least twice in the past year, and almost half reported remaining in their alternative schools for fewer than 90 days.
Subsequently, many of the continuation schools scored below their “feeder” traditional schools. In 2006-2007, 31% of continuation students passed the language arts sections of the state’s high school exit examination (compared with 61% of traditional students). In math, 26% of continuation students passed, compared with 61% of traditional students. However, upon further examination, researchers found an interesting trend; it was true that fewer continuation students passed the state exit examinations when they were initially given during 10th grade, but by 11th and 12th grades, continuation students passed the exams at equal or higher rates in comparison with other similarly “at-risk” students in the traditional schools who were also re-taking the exams (Ruiz de Velasco et al. 2008, 5).

In an overall study of the effectiveness of continuation high schools, Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012, 4) concluded that, “as a whole, they are failing to provide the academic and critical support services that students need to succeed.” With national and state-level policies currently under consideration to promote increased college and career readiness skills, Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012, 4) believe this is a watershed moment for American public education . . . [and] This ferment in public education presents both promise and peril for the alternative schools that are the subject of this report. The peril is that these schools and programs may remain an afterthought in the emerging curricular and accountability reforms. If so, our report offers a bleak prologue of what the vast majority of these schools will continue to offer those youth who find themselves falling behind but struggling to stay engaged in pursuit of a high school diploma.

The promise, however, is that this moment presents a window of opportunity to fully incorporate continuation high schools, intended as second-chance pathways to the diploma, into the thinking, planning, and articulation of new accountability reforms and innovation.
This is important and currently relevant work since according to Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012, 18), “California’s school drop-out rate continues to hover around 30 percent.”

*Characteristics of Effectiveness*

According to Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012, 4), “for most students who are not on track to graduate due to poor grades or insufficient credits, alternative schools remain simply early exit ramps from school. But we have seen enough successful schools and students to report with confidence that despite disappointing overall results, continuation high schools *can* provide important opportunities and resources for a vulnerable population of youth.”

In a search to discover the characteristics of those effective schools, McLaughlin and Santikian (2011, 4) identified six continuation schools that consistently displayed successful outcomes, including higher graduation rates than other alternative and traditional schools in their districts. Four of the schools had 100% graduation rates and the average for all six schools’ daily attendance rate was approximately 95%. All six schools were part of a network of “Plus” programs. While each school looked slightly different depending on the unique strategies adopted at each program, McLaughlin and Santikian (2011) identified consistent factors across programs:

*Admission*—Students choose to attend the programs, and they are accepted based on “program counselors’ assessment of students’ fit and potential for success” (McLaughlin and Santikian 2011, 5). This decision is based on an assessment of their attitudes and behaviors, and criteria including the likelihood that they will be able to graduate on time, have adequate English skills, and do not have a history of fighting. According to one school principal/manager, “The
counselors have learned over the years that the program lives and dies based on the kids who are there.” Counselors look for students who have had a “light bulb” moment and display “evidence that they are ‘serious about a second chance . . . to stay on campus and graduate’” (McLaughlin and Santikian 2011, 6).

_School Leaders_—referred to as counselors keep the alternative program connected with the traditional school, and serve as primary parent contact.

_Staff_—staff choose to work in the programs and oftentimes refer to it as “a mission or a calling” (McLaughlin and Santikian 2011, 7). The alternative program counselors have the ability to hire their teachers and as one stated, “‘My focus is on teachers who not only have strong instructional credentials but who have a passion for these kids’” (McLaughlin and Santikian 2011, 7). One prospective teacher described her interview process, which included students and staff, and stated that she was “‘blown away by the interview panel and students on it—by their focus on fit with the school and kids’” (McLaughlin and Santikian 2011, 7).

_Supportive School Environment_— Students in these programs expressed feeling emotionally and physically safe, and felt trusted by teachers. When comparing their experiences with their previous traditional school, students stated that in their previous traditional schools they felt, “‘invisible’ and marginalized . . . [at the alternative school] students felt respected, listened to, connected to their peers, classroom activities and teachers” (McLaughlin and Santikian 2011, 10). When teachers pay special “attention to students’ personal circumstances—such as working with public transit to get free passes—reinforces students’ perception that they are seen, heard, and respected” (McLaughlin and Santikian 2011, 11).
Student-centered Curricula and Pedagogy—Close student/teacher relationships: students felt teachers cared about them as an individual, and in turn, “teachers’ personal attention made all the difference in their motivation to work hard and focus on school” (McLaughlin & Santikian 2011, 11); Rigor & Flexibility: teachers have flexibility in creating their curriculum to meet current students’ needs with more emphasis on discussion, group work, and hands-on learning; Individualized Learning: alternative teachers are oftentimes challenged with teaching to different skill levels of students in the same class. “Across Plus sites, for instance, English teachers said that students’ reading ability levels ranged from 3rd to 12th grade.” One math teacher stated, “I have kids who count on their fingers to those who could do college-level math” (McLaughlin and Santikian 2011, 12); Attention to Life Skills: The alternative program is about “more than academics. The number one goal is for students to graduate on time. But the program intends as well ‘to change their perspective on life and to really value education,’” including instruction on self-management, working with others, setting goals, and assistance with applications for college and financial aid (McLaughlin and Santikian 2011, 11-13).

District Context Matters—A Menu of Alternatives: With multiple alternative options, Plus programs are not “dumping grounds.” Students not qualified to enter Plus have other options, helping to ensure “fit” into the “right” alternative. According to McLaughlin and Santikian (2011, 13-14),

Many continuation programs across the state function as ‘dumping grounds’ or ‘safety valves’ for comprehensive high schools because they are the only, or one of few, alternative placements available. As a consequence, continuation programs in these district settings experience high levels of churn as students enter and leave on a weekly if not daily basis and teachers struggle to respond to the very different personal and academic needs students bring to the program. Plus, in contrast, is able to select students most likely to succeed because other options exist for students who require more or different academic and personal supports.
Supportive District Leadership: Superintendent support shields alternative programs during financially stressful times. The principal/counselor of the Plus program is also part of the district management team—the Plus program is not a subdivision under another district administrator. Teachers at the various Plus programs meet once a month for professional development and networking, and “adopt uniform measures of success” (McLaughlin and Santikian 2011, 14).

Data, Advocacy and Accountability—Even though the Plus programs have achieved a level of success, they are not well known in the community and at times battle the stigma that they are a “destination for the ‘bad’ or ‘dumb’ kids” (McLaughlin and Santikian 2011, 14). Therefore, there is an emphasis on promoting and advocating for the programs—educating people about the programs’ successes, including graduation rates.

Challenges to Effectiveness

Policy Implications—According to Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012, 6), the nontraditional nature of alternative schools, and the populations they serve, can sometimes pose unique challenges to policymakers, including, “how to measure the effectiveness of schools” serving concentrations of at-risk students, and “what ought to be the public’s legitimate expectations of teacher and principal performance in this sub-sector of secondary schools?”

Policies (federal, state, and local) can also at times create additional challenges for those in the field of alternative education. One example was identified in Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin’s (2012, 7) discovery of contradictory state-level policies—one stating that continuation schools were intended to be schools of choice where students enrolled through voluntary membership, and another state code that “authorizes school districts to allow for the
‘involuntary’ transfer of students to continuation high schools for behavioral reasons unrelated to academic performance . . . a comprehensive high school principal may make an involuntary transfer to a continuation school if he/she determines that ‘a pupil’s presence causes a danger to persons or property or threatens to disrupt the instruction processes.’” According to Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012, 7) This “suggest[s] that a continuation high school should provide a high quality alternative route to the diploma for struggling students, but it can also be a dumping ground for students deemed too disruptive for comprehensive schools. In fact, we saw many schools where both types of students were placed in the same classroom creating an untenable situation for teachers and principals trying to create a coherent set of student supports.”

With regard to student entrance into a continuation school, Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012, 13) stated, “The most disruptive, but common, situation we observed was the practice of permitting continuously open or ‘rolling’ admission to the continuation school. In these schools, teachers frequently complained that it was impossible to plan for direct instruction because new students would appear in their classes every week or sometimes every day of the week.” In some cases, “the institutional needs of the sending school were allowed to take precedence over the individual academic and social needs of the students involved.”

At Capacity with Additional Need—Almost all school leaders stated that the need for alternative education exceeded current availability; some administrators indicated they “could place at least twice as many students in alternative options if they were available” (Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin 2012, 18).
Marginalized & Professionally Isolated—According to Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012, 16), educators in some of the more successful schools felt their interventions were “invisible,” unknown to policy makers and other practitioners looking for effective strategies. Furthermore, principals felt like they were “pioneers” who were “offered no roadmap or professional training to inform their efforts. Nearly all described a process of experimental implementation over a long period of time, guided and driven by their own instincts and positive goals for their students” (Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin 2012, 19).

Another interesting area in which teachers mentioned the need for additional professional development was “building trust with students.”

They explained that many students come to continuation settings after experiencing unfair or disrespectful treatment in their prior settings. Rebuilding trust with these students was important for ensuring school discipline. But more importantly, students who trusted and felt supported by the adults in the school felt safe to have honest discussions about their academic weaknesses, and to experiment with new approaches to learning independently and in teams. Here again, teachers reported that they were on their own to recognize and develop skills, such as trust-building, that were critical to their effectiveness. In the absence of a Professional Learning Community, teachers and principals were left to resort to the vicissitudes of school-level experimentation and a trial-and-error approach to instructional change. (Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin 2012, 19-20)

This research speaks to the heart of this dissertation study in several ways—by identifying the need for alternative education, describing characteristics of several effective alternative schools, and highlighting the importance of further research and policies that identify, disseminate, and promote best practices. According to Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012, 24), “for too many youth, opportunities to connect with school, to imagine hopeful futures, and to set out on a positive pathway are lost when schools do not or cannot respond to their needs—and do not offer them a genuine alternative.” Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012) contribute an important, current look at effective programs with common characteristics that are
quite different from their traditional counterparts, and quite different from other less effective alternatives. Consistent with findings from other studies on effective alternative schools, their leaders and teachers feel marginalized, isolated, and like pioneers relying on their “gut instincts” to best serve their students.

As a concluding thought, Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin (2012, 23) stated that,

A major theme in our multi-year study of continuation schools has been about their essential invisibly within their communities and school districts . . . Many principals and teachers we met expressed surprise that researchers were interested in their schools. We also met principals and counselors in sending schools who routinely send students into alternative settings but confess to never having visited one. And, we have communicated with many colleagues in the research community who are knowledgeable about schools and school reform in California but had never heard of a continuation school or were unaware of the sheer scale of the alternative education sector in California.

Early Indicators of Best Practices

Characteristics of effective alternative programs in California, identified by McLaughlin and Santikian (2011), are strikingly similar to historical “best practices” dating back to Wehlage et al.’s (1989) groundbreaking in-depth study of fourteen successful alternative schools working with at-risk students. The focus of their study was to better understand why students drop out of school and what practices are most successful with reconnecting at-risk students. They conducted three week-long visits to schools that included observations, interviews with students, teachers and counselors, and data collection including: pre and post-tests measuring attitude changes, writing ability and reading level; and examined attendance and completion rates, changes in GPA, disciplinary referrals, and rehabilitative services. Wehlage et al. (1989) identified common best practices of effective alternative schools that have been fairly consistent with reviews of alternative education literature conducted by Raywid (1994), Barr & Parrett (2001), and Aron (2006). These common characteristics of effective alternatives include:
creating a sense of community or family within the school (Wehlage 1989; Raywid 1994), small school size (Raywid 1994; Barr & Parrett 2001), with an emphasis on developing positive relationships between teachers and students (Wehlage 1989; Raywid 1994; Aron 2006), a shared leadership structure with teachers (Wehlage 1989; Raywid 1994; Barr & Parrett 2001; Aron 2006), choice membership for students (Raywid 1994; Barr & Parrett 2001; Aron 2006), choice membership for teachers (Raywid 1994; Aron 2006), partnerships with the community (Raywid 1994; Aron 2006), caring teachers (Wehlage 1989; Raywid 1994; Barr & Parrett 2001), who were afforded autonomy and flexibility (Raywid 1994; Barr & Parrett 2001; Aron 2006), offering a challenging curriculum (Raywid 1994; Barr & Parrett 2001; Aron 2006), that is relevant (Wehlage 1989; Raywid 1994; Barr & Parrett 2001; Aron 2006), and individualized (Wehlage 1989; Barr & Parrett 2001; Aron 2006).

Additionally, similar to McLaughlin and Santikian’s (2011) findings, Wehlage et al. (1989, 73) discovered, “Virtually all of the fourteen schools we studied sought to establish programs matched to the characteristics of particular groups of at-risk youth. By carefully assessing their students, most were able to develop innovations that spoke to the needs and circumstances of specific young people.” Furthermore, “Generic programs intended to serve all who might be in danger of dropping out are unlikely to be as effective as programs designed with specific students, situations and aims in mind” (Wehlage et al. 1989, 75).

It is interesting that leaders and teachers in Ruiz de Velasco and McLaughlin’s (2012) study felt as if they were pioneers, even though their identified “best practices” were quite similar to those discovered over twenty years before. However, significant questions and gaps in the research remain: A better differentiation between types of alternatives is needed in order to inform policymakers and practitioners of different (and effective) purposes, philosophies, and
practices within alternative education; A better understanding of how these best practices are currently implemented in effective alternative schools is also needed—what these best practices look like in action; And, with the recent influx of research on the importance of leadership in general education, a better understanding of the leadership characteristics and challenges for effective alternative provisions.

Furthermore, in a review of the literature on alternative education, Aron (2006, 13) stated, “These noteworthy practices or attributes are striking not only in how similar they all are, but in that most are qualities that would seem to benefit any educational program, not just ‘alternative’ ones.”

*Essential Supports for School Improvement*

Perhaps the most extensive study of the leadership and organizational characteristics of effective school reform efforts was conducted by Bryk et al. (2010). In 1988, the Chicago School Reform Act was passed in response to an evident need for significant, system-wide changes. The Act decentralized power of the central bureaucracy and established Local School Councils (LSC) within each of the 575 city schools to redesign and lead reform efforts in their specific school communities. According to Bryk et al. (2010, 12), “At base here was a simple but powerful belief. If local school professionals reconnected with the parents and communities they were supposed to serve, and if everyone were empowered to reform their schools, together they could be much more effective in solving local problems than some impersonal bureaucracy.”

Each Local School Council (LSC) was comprised of the school’s principal, and a mix of elected school personnel, parents, and community members. LSCs were given authority to hire
and evaluate their own principal, approve their school-specific improvement plan, and distribute discretionary funds (approximately $500,000 annually by the mid-1990s) (Bryk et al. 2010, 15).

With limited guidance and direction from the central office, individual school communities developed their own improvement plans, creating a rich environment for researchers to study the leadership, organizational, and community characteristics of schools and the effectiveness of their different reform models. Analyses of reading comprehension and math scores revealed the “story of three thirds”—with approximately one-third of the schools showing improvement, one-third struggling, and another one-third showing no signs of improvement—these schools were “left behind by reform” (Bryk et al. 2010, 16).

To better understand what attributed to these different outcomes, Bryk et al. (2010) relied on a longitudinal database created by the Consortium on Chicago School Research (CCSR), student-specific data including attendance, age, race, gender, home address, school attended, and grade level, and additional data from the US Census, public aid, housing, crime, and data collected from two other research studies at the time on social services and microneighborhood data. The majority of data were collected from principal, student, and teacher surveys between 1991 and 1997, with substantial response rates—70% of teachers in 401 schools participated in 1991; over 90% of principals participated in 1992. In 1994, 56% of elementary schools participated in teacher and/or student surveys; that number increased to 88% participation in 1997 (Bryk et al. 2010, 27).

As a result of this study, researchers gained insights into how leadership and organizational characteristics impact school improvement efforts, and subsequently developed the following framework of *Five Essential Supports*:
Essential Support #1: *Leadership*—Indicated by inclusive leadership; instructional leadership; teacher influence; LSC contribution; program coherence; SIP (School Improvement Plan) implementation.

Essential Support #2: *Parent-Community Ties*—Indicated by teacher outreach to parents; parent involvement in the school.

Essential Support #3: *Teachers’ Professional Capacity (and Commitment)*—Indicated by teacher orientation toward innovation; school commitment.

Essential Support #4: *Student-Centered Learning Climate*—Indicated by safety; classroom disruptions.

Essential Support #5: *Instructional Guidance*—Indicated by curriculum implementation and alignment (Bryk et al. 2010, 82).

In their study of these indicators in Chicago public elementary school reform efforts, Bryk et al. (2010, 197-198) “found that schools having strong indicator reports were up to ten times more likely to improve students’ reading and mathematics learning than were contexts where three or more of these indicators were weak. Moreover, a low score in even just one indicator reduced the likelihood of improvement to less than 10 percent.”

Furthermore, Bryk et al. (2010, 207) stated, “Some of the most powerful relationships found in our data are associated with the effects of relational trust and how it operates as both a lubricant for organizational change and a moral resource for sustaining the hard work of local school improvement. Absent such trust, it is nearly impossible for schools to develop and sustain strength in the essential supports.” They compare the *Five Essential Supports for School*
Improvement and Relational Trust to baking a cake. Leadership, the “driver for change” is analogous to the chef, with the other four essentials comprising the ingredients for the cake—all necessary. Relational Trust is “the oven heat that transforms the blended ingredients into a full, rich cake” (Bryk et al. 2010, 203).

Survey data and longitudinal case studies of twelve Chicago elementary schools indicated that if a school had low relational trust, they “had only a one in seven chance of demonstrating improved student learning between 1991 and 1996 . . . Perhaps most significant, schools with chronically weak trust reports over this period had virtually no chance of improving in either reading or mathematics” (Bryk and Schneider 2002, 124).

Research on Educational Leadership

Over the past decade research on school leadership has received additional attention due to the increased emphasis on the role principals play in school reform efforts and overall organizational effectiveness. The Wallace Foundation devoted a decade to researching educational leadership (at state, district, and building levels) and distributed over 280 million dollars in grant funding toward the effort. Four primary learnings emerged: “State and district education leadership policies must work in harmony; District leaders need to support strong principal leadership; Top-notch principals are a must for school improvement; Better training results in better principals” (Education Leadership: An Agenda for School Improvement 2010, 2-3). Furthermore, principals are at the center of school reform efforts, important in attracting and retaining quality teachers, and situated in a central position to influence excellence beyond the individual classroom, throughout the organization.
In an effort to better understand leadership effectiveness, researchers have identified different leadership styles and tried to explain if there is a relationship between style and the context in which leadership is exercised.

After conducting an extensive review of literature on school leadership, Leithwood et al. (2006, 3) identified “seven strong claims”:

1. “School leadership is second only to classroom teaching as an influence on pupil learning.” And, “As far as we are aware, there is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership” (Leithwood et al. 2006, 5).

2. “Almost all successful leaders draw on the same repertoire of basic leadership practices.” Leithwood et al.’s (2006, 6) review of the literature identified four basic categories: “building vision and setting directions; understanding and developing people; redesigning the organisation; and managing the teaching and learning programme.”

3. “The ways in which leaders apply these basic leadership practices—not the practices themselves—demonstrate responsiveness to, rather than dictation by, the contexts in which they work.” Successful leaders are able to apply a combination of their repertoire of basic leadership skills to meet the present contextual leadership needs (Leithwood et al. 2006, 8).

4. “School leaders improve teaching and learning indirectly and most powerfully through their influence on staff motivation, commitment and working conditions.” School leaders “made modest direct contributions to staff capacities, [but] they had quite strong and positive influences on staff members’ motivations, commitments and beliefs about the supportiveness of their working conditions” (Leithwood et al. 2006, 10).
5. “School leadership has a greater influence on schools and pupils when it is widely distributed.” The concept of “Total Leadership” comprised of teachers, staff, parents, central office, students and school administrators was found to account for “27% of the variation in student achievement across schools” (Leithwood et al. 2006, 12).

6. “Some patterns of distribution are more effective than others.” While evidence of whether certain models of distributed leadership are more or less effective has not yet been studied for schools, in the private sector research suggests that “coordinated patterns of leadership” are more effective than uncoordinated efforts by many people throughout the organization (Leithwood et al. 2006, 13).

7. “A small handful of personal traits explains a high proportion of the variation in leadership effectiveness.” According to Leithwood et al. (2006, 14), research suggests that “at least under challenging circumstances, the most successful school leaders are open-minded and ready to learn from others. They are also flexible rather than dogmatic in their thinking within a system of core values, persistent (e.g. in pursuit of high expectations of staff motivation, commitment, learning and achievement for all), resilient and optimistic.”

Distributed Leadership

In order to better understand the impact school principals have on student learning, Louis and Wahlstrom (2011) conducted over 1,000 interviews with school district personnel, parents, and other stakeholders, and surveyed more than 8,000 principals and teachers across the country. Findings indicated that, “changing a school’s culture requires shared or distributed leadership, which engages many stakeholders in major improvement roles, and instructional leadership, in which administrators take responsibility for shaping improvements at the classroom level”
(Louis and Wahlstrom 2011, 52). Their findings challenge the often-referenced reliance on one leader as the transformational change agent or “turnaround leader,” and move toward an understanding that, “Schools need to build strong cultures in which the many tasks of transforming schools require many leaders. The common task of improvement provides the motivation for change” (Louis and Wahlstrom 2011, 52-53).

According to Harris et al. (2007, 345), “The hope of transforming schools through the actions of individual leaders is quickly fading. Strong leaders with exceptional vision and action do exist but unfortunately they do not come in sufficient numbers to meet the demands and challenges of today’s schools. An alternative conceptualization is one where leadership is distributed and understood in terms of shared activities and multiple interactions.”

Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004, 28-29) further explain that a benefit of distributed leadership is that it, “increases opportunities for the organization to benefit from the capacities of more of its members, permits members to capitalize on the range of their individual strengths, and develops, among organizational members, a fuller appreciation of interdependence and how one’s behavior affects the organization as a whole.”

*Contextual Leadership*

In addition to studies on leadership structures, there are ongoing discussions about the relationship between leadership style and context—more specifically whether different leadership styles are more effective in different contexts.

According to Leithwood (2005, 623),

a great deal of the educational leadership literature claims that the context in which leaders work is of enormous importance in determining what they do. But such claims
typically have prompted research about leadership in one context at [a] time . . . These ‘one-context-at-a-time’ studies tell us little about how variations in context are related to variations in leadership practices, the kind of evidence that is needed if we are to become clearer about the factors stimulating successful leadership practices.

Dimmock (2012) further states that there is ongoing debate over whether a leader’s style impacts or changes the culture of the organization to match his/her leadership style, or whether the culture of the organization impacts or changes the leader’s style—by the leader shifting his/her leadership style to meet the current needs of the organization. This debate “raises the important issue of principal selection and placement according to their leadership compatibility with the particular characteristics of the school environment” (Dimmock 2012, 33).

According to Dimmock (2012, 199), “Especially in more ‘extreme’ school contexts . . . we underestimate the influence of context on leadership. It is reasonable to conclude that since school contexts differ enormously in their challenges, and given the variation in leaders’ characteristics and abilities, the degree to which school context impacts leaders’ practices and behaviours is highly variable.” This suggests that an area for further research and understanding would be within the diverse and “extreme” contexts in the field of alternative education—to better understand the relationship between leadership style and context, including whether the intended leadership role is to change, create, or sustain. Dimmock (2012) further stated that, “As schools within systems diversify more, however, the question arises as to the extent to which leaders themselves need to identify more clearly the contexts in which they feel most comfortable to lead, and employers to make more refined judgements to match them with appropriate schools. There is both need and great scope for new research on this theme” (Dimmock 2012, 200).
In order to better understand the relationship between leadership style and effectiveness in different alternative education contexts, Hill (2005) completed an interesting dissertation study examining whether there was a relationship between program effectiveness and type of program (identified according to Raywid’s (1994) typology); a relationship between leadership style and program effectiveness; and whether there was a significant relationship between leadership style, type of program, and program effectiveness. With a 21% survey return rate from alternative programs across the state of Indiana serving at-risk students, 35 programs identified themselves as Type I, 10 identified as Type II, and 5 identified as Type III. Similar to Raywid’s (1994) interpretation, Hill (2005, 54) considered Type I programs “true alternatives” and compared them with results from Type II and Type III categorized together (and referred to as Type II) since they were both considered “not true alternatives” due to their punitive structures.

Interestingly, the findings from this study indicated no significant difference in leadership styles between the different types of programs, and there was no significant relationship between the type of program and its effectiveness (Hill 2005, 55). With regard to leadership style and effectiveness, the study found a significant relationship between the transformational leadership characteristic of inspirational motivation and program effectiveness (Hill 2005, 58). However, no significant relationship was found between type of program, leadership style and program effectiveness (Hill 2005, 67).

Similar to challenges faced by other studies using Raywid’s typology, survey respondents indicated it was difficult to identify which type their program fit, believing their programs were a mixture of more than one (Hill 2005, 65). As a result, Hill (2005, 68) concluded that, “Defining each alternative education program type presented a challenge for the respondents in an attempt to pigeon-hole what appears to be the evolution of a one-size-fits-all program.”
This seems, however, to dismiss the possibility that the typology is flawed and insufficient in capturing the unique nature of the schools. Perhaps an extended typology that more accurately reflects the philosophies and cultures of the alternative schools would have resulted in better distinctions and findings regarding the relationship between type of alternative program, leadership style, and effectiveness. It appears a more in-depth approach using interviews and observations would better identify the different types of schools based on their philosophies and cultures.

Leadership Influences on Philosophy and Culture

Tallerico and Burstyn (2004) conducted a study of an alternative program serving students who, as a result of a zero-tolerance policy for possession of weapons, were prohibited from remaining in their traditional school settings. The purpose of this school was primarily focused on preventing violence in the traditional and alternative education programs, and at first glance would be most aligned with Raywid’s Type II Last Chance programs. However, through interviews with program administrators over a five year period, Tallerico and Burstyn (2004) discovered philosophies and practices that were innovative and focused on the whole development of individual students.

Even though the school was referred to as “the weapons school,” when the alternative school administrators “defined the essence of this alternative program, it was typically in terms of distinguishing its caring climate and safety from other neighborhood or home situations in which students lived. School leaders considered this distinctiveness one of [the school’s] key educational benefits” (Tallerico and Burstyn 2004, 41). Administrators developed a “nurturing climate . . . an ‘oasis’ or ‘refuge’” (Tallerico and Burstyn 2004, 40).
The weapons students had possessed tended to range from nail clippers to cutters, and administrators believed most students carried the weapons (rarely guns) as a matter of cultural norms or for protection, not with the intent to harm. One administrator stated, “We don’t see a lot of remarkably dangerous children in this program. Most of it is poor judgment and immaturity” (Tallerico and Burstyn 2004, 41). Administrators and teachers viewed students as “having made bad choices, rather than being dangerous or particularly ‘tough’” (Tallerico and Burstyn 2004, 41).

Because of its small size, administrators and teachers were able to develop positive relationships with individual students. The low student teacher ratio allowed teachers to “try something different” in their classrooms, and teachers were hired who were “open to what will work for the children and whatever flexibility it takes instructionally” (Tallerico and Burstyn 2004, 37). The administrators observed and valued “flexible” instruction and hands-on activities to engage students, and they offered extra classes including art and radio broadcasting.

According to Tallerico and Burstyn (2004, 46), their findings “bring to life what a ‘whole-school approach’ to violence prevention means in practice. It includes: programming for students that integrates social and academic skills; professional development for adults that complements student learning goals; and continuous reinforcement of a school culture that sees promise in every child, regardless of previous behaviors.” The culture of the school had a strong focus on the development of the individual student more than a focus on preventing violence through punitive measures.

Similar to experiences in other alternative provisions, this school faced significant challenges—mostly external, including: feeling isolated from the rest of its district, high
mobility of the school location, financial instability, employment insecurity, and a perception of having a lower status than other schools in the district. However, according to Tallerico and Burstyn (2004, 48), this study showed “how educators sometimes come together and make a way out of no way. At a systemic level, however, it also illustrates how challenging—and perhaps unfair—it is to be a different kind of school with only superficial support and nominal legitimacy within the district as a whole.”

Even though the purpose of this study was not to identify the school within Raywid’s typology, or compare the school’s characteristics or effectiveness with other alternative violence prevention programs, it provides a glimpse into the necessity for more in-depth analyses of alternative provisions to truly understand their philosophy and culture. Initially, this program appears to be what Raywid (1994) would classify as a Type II Last Chance program with a focus on prevention—preventing violence. However, upon closer inspection, the shared philosophy and practices of administrators and teachers was not punitive (as typically thought of for Type II schools), but rather innovative and focused on the development of the whole student.

Another example of a leader’s impact on the culture of a school was found in a case study conducted by Kim and Taylor (2008) of an alternative high school that was considered a “safety net” for students who were behind in the number of credits required to graduate. Some students chose to enroll in the school, others were mandated. Using classroom observations, analyses of documents, and interviews with students, teachers, and administrators, positive and negative characteristics of this credit recovery alternative school model were identified. According to Kim and Taylor (2008, 214), students indicated that they liked their alternative school; they felt the teachers were caring, provided them with personal attention and extra help, and they felt respected. Students were able to quickly earn credits, received better grades, felt more self-
confident than they did in their traditional school, and indicated that they would prefer to stay at the alternative school. Even though students expressed a positive view of their school, Kim and Taylor (2008, 216) discovered that the school “needs to offer a more rigorous curriculum that emphasizes critical thinking, synthesis, and higher order thinking, which, in turn, would help students achieve their goals.” They learned that students had “hopes, dreams, goals, and aspirations for their futures”—some included a college education. However, the school principal stressed the importance of “core basic courses [that] may not prepare the students to become nuclear engineers, but, he rhetorically asked, ‘How many kids at the alternative school want to be a nuclear engineer?’” (Kim and Taylor 2008, 213). Even though students may not have had the specific goal of nuclear engineering, (Kim and Taylor 2008, 213) found that many of them did have ambitions that required “a more rigorous college-bound curriculum and career counseling. However, the students did not receive such counseling at the alternative school, and precollege curriculum and career counseling were not part of the school’s stated purpose or vision.”

With a focus on credit recovery and enabling students to acquire credits quickly, this school’s primary focus was on prevention—preventing students from failing or dropping out, and this philosophy and culture was supported by, and in alignment with, the leader’s personal philosophy.

Leadership Transitions & Philosophical Match

Gordon and Patterson (2006) further examined transitions in leadership and the impact of a new leader’s (mis)alignment with a school’s established leadership culture. They conducted a qualitative study over a four year period including interviews and observations of twelve education reform schools going through principal transitions. During their observations of leadership transitions, they identified five leadership styles—Overt and Covert top-down
leadership, Vanguard leadership including more than one person, Network leadership shared throughout the school, and Network Wannabe leadership where shared leadership was desired but not achieved (Gordon and Patterson 2006, 213).

Their findings indicate that effective leadership styles (as expressed by teachers and based on student test scores) vary depending on the culture of the school, whether teachers and administrators have a shared vision and philosophy, and whether the leader is authentic in his/her leadership style.

One Covert top-down leader expressed the desire to share decision-making with teachers, but his practices were mostly autocratic and in misalignment with the teachers’ vision for the school. At the end of his three years in leadership, students had performed poorly on statewide tests. After retirement, he was succeeded by an Overt Top-down leader whose vision was closely aligned with the teachers’. Because this school community had a previous culture of top-down leadership, and “teachers in this school were seeking a forceful leader who would set a direction and provide them with guidance,” they expected the vision to be determined by the principal, and expressed satisfaction with the new leadership (Gordon and Patterson 2006, 214).

In another school, Vanguard Leadership was shared between the principal and a teacher who were both involved in the initial introduction of the reform effort and continued to be its driving force. The teacher was referred to as the “champion” of the reform. When the principal was retiring, a new principal was hired in advance to be “trained” by the school community to “carry on what we’ve started” (Gordon and Patterson 2006, 217). The new principal aligned with the reform agenda at the school and transition was smooth, helped by acceptance and endorsement by the previous principal and the “champion” teacher. According to Gordon and
Patterson (2006, 218), Vanguard leadership “is shared, but operates from a small power base, with a few key individuals leading the rest of the group.”

*Network Leadership* was shared by teachers and administrators; teachers’ expertise extended beyond their individual classrooms to involvement in school-wide decision-making. In the study of one school, the leadership transition occurred halfway through the first year of the reform with one “Networker” leaving and another “Networker” beginning. Gordon and Patterson (2006, 219) observed that “leadership was seen as shared throughout the school by teachers and ‘two great team leaders.’” This school took pride in being “different,” leaders showed concern for staff and trusted their expertise, there was a strong sense of community in the school, and they had experienced success. One teacher responded, “The leadership for A+ is intrinsic. . . . We don’t have a leader” (Gordon and Patterson 2006, 219). The original Network principal hired teachers who were willing to engage in the decision-making of the reform initiative, thus creating a shared leadership model. When the second principal displayed Network leadership as well, Gordon and Patterson (2006, 221) believe “in this setting, Network leadership was effective whereas in another setting, [the principal’s] decision not to take a strong stand might have been perceived as a weakness.”

*Network Wannabes* were observed as leaders who wanted collaboration and shared decision-making, but were unable to achieve it. One principal had been in his position for a year before the reform initiative was implemented. As part of the new reform, the principal tried to change his leadership style from a “supervisor” role to a “facilitator” of more collaborative leadership with the teachers. However, the teachers expected their leader to provide guidance, and struggled with the new Network Wannabe leadership style. The leader was perceived as having a lack of ability, being weak, and giving teachers too much responsibility. The successor
principal the next year was more *Overt-Top-down* and the teachers tended to prefer this leadership style (Gordon and Patterson 2006, 224-225).

Gordon and Patterson (2006, 208) believe that “one model of leadership does not meet the needs of every school community,” and they concluded that, “there are multiple ways to be an effective leader. Teachers have different expectations for their leaders and compatibility for a particular leadership type is affected by the values and norms of what teachers believe is effective leadership” (Gordon and Patterson 2006, 224). Furthermore, “Leaders do not stand alone, but rather negotiate power with others in their school communities. These negotiations allow for leaders of different types, types that meet the requirements of their constituents. There is no one-size-fits-all model to successful leadership” (Gordon and Patterson 2006, 224).

Findings from Gordon and Patterson (2006) seem to support Dimmock’s (2012) belief in the importance of principal selection based on the match of personal leadership style and the philosophy and cultural norms of the organization.

*Sustainability—Research on Challenges in Sustaining Innovative Efforts*

Sustainability concerns and challenges discovered by Raywid (1984), Wehlage et al. (1989), and Clark (1998) continue to be identified and examined by researchers studying schools for at-risk populations as well as innovative schools of choice. Two types of sustainability were identified in the literature—sustainability of the school itself, and sustainability of the school’s unique, nontraditional philosophy and culture.

After spending over thirty years in public education, Fink (2000, xiii) stated, “Over my career, I have been associated with a number of new and innovative schools. They all appeared
to me to have started out similarly, as places of hope, enthusiasm, energy, and creativity. Within
a relatively short time these schools . . . seem to have become rather conventional schools.”

In an effort to explore whether there are “life cycles” to innovative schools, and what
those life cycles might look like, Fink (2000) reflected on his personal experiences and
interviewed other school personnel to identify and examine the situations and factors that shifted
the culture of a school that was started in 1970 in Canada as a beacon of innovation, and today
resembles its more traditional counterparts.

After several years, the school encountered resistance to their nontraditional practices and
the government enforced stricter policies that shifted the culture of the innovative school by
placing restrictions on curriculum and textbooks, making it more difficult for “experimental
courses” to be developed and approved, and implementing changes that shifted one of the
school’s core philosophies of education away from a one-level or track of difficulty to offering
three levels of difficulty for each core class (Fink 2000, 22). These policy changes coincided
with a recession that significantly reduced financial support, and new costly mandates were
created including one that called for a substantial increase in special education services.

In addition to changes at the government level, there was also a shift at the Board level as
Trustees became more actively involved in district operations and pushed for more district-wide
policies, and less individuality of schools. Some of these new policies changed cultural norms in
the innovative school, including shifts in the organizational structure and changes in grading
policies that once again went against the original philosophy and culture of the school (Fink
predictability than with creativity and experimentation.”
Other “turning points” identified in this study included transitions in leadership and staff mobility at the school level. According to Fink (2000, 28), eight years after the school was established, “only 23 of the 135 staff members had been at [the school] in its first 3 years. Only 5 of the original 10 chairmen remained.” The other 5 were promoted to other positions in the school district. As system-wide policies shifted the original philosophy and unique culture of the school, and budgets were cut, and transitions in leaders and staff occurred, enrollment began to dwindle and subsequently teachers were let go and fewer extracurricular activities were offered.

While Fink (2000) primarily focused on the life cycle of innovative efforts, he also discovered that even though the original school was struggling to exist, it had had a significant impact on the rest of the district’s traditional schools. At the time the study was authored, 13 of the 17 secondary principals in traditional schools in the region had worked at the innovative school for a substantial amount of time and organizational characteristics once unique to the innovative school were now found in traditional schools throughout the system (Fink 2000, 31-32).

Similar to Fink (2000), Tyner-Mullings (2014) studied the “life cycle” of a transformation of one of the lowest performing districts in New York City. The reform began with the creation of new elementary schools and then a subsequent, equally innovative junior/high school was established in 1985. The junior/high school, a school of choice with entrance based on a lottery, experienced significant success resulting in growing influence on other schools in the city in the 1980s and 1990s (Tyner-Mullings 2014, 4).

The school was designed with a nontraditional model of education that included organizational characteristics of a smaller school size with fewer than 600 students (who were
then placed into smaller groups of 75-100 students based on grade level), smaller class sizes, block scheduling, inquiry-based teaching and learning, community service, student choices in classes, offerings of college-level courses, and staff involvement in decision making.

Core philosophies of education were student-centered with an emphasis on developing positive relationships with students based on the belief that “the way to develop successful students is to strengthen the bond between teacher and student so that the teacher has a personal, not a professional, stake in the success of each student” (Tyner-Mullings 2014, 9). Other philosophies included giving students ownership of their learning, assessing student learning by portfolios—not Regents exams, and an emphasis on students’ personal reflection and future planning.

Tyner-Mullings (2014, 81) described the innovation and success of the alternative school model as well as “The decline of the institution.” As the school became successful, teachers were recruited away from the school by other schools and organizations.

As teachers from [the school] moved, like missionaries, to start their own school and bring the world of ‘alternativism’ to other institutions, the school was unable to maintain its structure. Its membership exploded like a star and spread across the city, seeding new schools with its remnants . . . Over the past fifteen years, [the school] has lost all of its original teachers and found itself on several lists of Schools under Registration Review (SURR), indicating that learning is at such a low level that the school may have to close or undergo dramatic transformation. (Tyner-Mullings 2014, 83)

Similar to Fink (2000), Tyner-Mullings (2014) identified possible contributors to the decline of this innovative and once successful institution:

1. *Transitions in leadership.* One of the founding charismatic leaders left the school for a more influential position in the district leaving a gap in vision transfer to subsequent leaders and newer teachers. With turnovers in successive leaders, the understanding
of and commitment to the school’s unique nontraditional philosophy and culture faded and became more traditional.

2. *High teacher mobility.* High teacher turnover occurred as teachers who were once pioneers in the school left to lead other schools. According to Tyner-Mullings (2014, 89), the founding charismatic leader was “surprised by the amount of turnover that occurred in such a short period: ‘It seemed to me, given how much self-governance there already was in the structure, that it wasn’t such a big thing who was the leader.’” Teacher mobility was significant, with the loss of “tough old-timers” who were grounded and committed to the alternative philosophy. In the 2000-2001 school year alone, there was a turnover of seven of the eight seventh and eighth grade teachers.

3. *Students/parents lacked an understanding of and alignment with the alternative philosophy of the school.* The desire to escape their “rough situation” and enroll in a “safe place for students” became the motivation for choosing to attend the alternative school, not a commitment to its unique culture (Tyner-Mullings 2014, 91).

According to Tyner-Mullings (2014, 91), “it appears that both new teachers and students were entering [the school] with a slightly skewed idea of what the school truly was.” This resulted in a lack of understanding and commitment to the philosophy and led to subsequent changes in culture. For example, teachers became less involved in the decision-making practices of the school, the use of portfolios for assessment was replaced with a focus on passing Regents exams, and New York City policies changed the school from choice membership to assignment.
In addition, more small schools were opening throughout New York City creating competition for students and funding.

In support of findings by Fink (2000) and Tyner-Mullings (2014), Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, and Manning (2001) described common shifts or changes identified in the literature that “sabotage” innovative schools:

Lack of continuity in or inconsistency of exceptional school leadership. When initial charismatic leaders are administratively rotated between schools, they become hard acts to follow.

Problems of staff recruitment and retention. Initial (sometimes hand-picked) enthusiasts lose their energy, or get promoted, and are hard to replace with teachers of similar vision or levels of commitment.

Governments and administrators change, and so do their policy emphases, often running counter to the changes to which teachers originally committed themselves. (Hargreaves, Earl, Moore, and Manning 2001, 159-160).

These studies on the challenges facing schools’ sustainability highlight the importance (roles and influences) of leadership at the state, district and school levels.

Summary

Definition of Alternative Education

While public alternative education provisions have grown significantly over the past 50 years, the philosophy behind “alternative” has been in flux making it difficult to define, study, and evaluate. Without an agreed upon definition or philosophy, much of the research on alternative education is based on case studies describing the characteristics and effectiveness of individual schools, or broader studies that provide a more general description of nontraditional offerings at the state and national levels, with few examining effectiveness.
Numerous studies have used Raywid’s (1994) typology of Type I, II, III schools to better distinguish between different types of provisions, but case studies have raised questions about its sufficiency as individual programs/schools struggle to identify within one specific “type.” Raywid’s further classification based on the general philosophy of the school to either “fix the student” or “fix the school” provides a broader distinction. After a review of the literature on alternative education, I propose an extension of this broader classification to differentiate schools based on their culture—how they achieve their mission by having a *Focus on Development*—evident when the programs/schools are student-centered, helping them identify their strengths and develop the skills needed to transition to further education or acquire living wage employment; or having a *Focus on Prevention*—evident when programs/schools are intent on dropout prevention, credit recovery, violence prevention or preventing disruptions in the traditional school setting.

*District Leadership*

One especially interesting finding from the literature on sustaining innovation pointed to the influence of the superintendent by supporting and upholding the alternative school philosophy and culture, maintaining financial support, and deciding how principals, teachers, and students are matched with alternative schools—by choice due to alignment with mission, philosophy and culture, or placed (assigned). This seems to be a different type of influence than research findings on the role and influence of superintendents in traditional settings. Additional research is needed to better understand the influence of a superintendent, and how those influences differ by context (alternative v. traditional) and between superintendents with and without alternative schools in their districts.
The literature on school leadership revealed that the principal has significant influence in the organization as a central figure in the school. While teachers have the most direct impact on student learning (within their individual classrooms), the principal is instrumental in hiring teachers and leading and managing the organization as a whole.

While the roles, importance and influence of school leaders in traditional schools have been widely studied, there is still a significant gap in studies on leadership for alternative settings. We can assume from the literature that transformational leadership would be a good place to start, as well as distributed leadership, as research has indicated it is necessary for innovation, change, and for the sustainability of change. These connections have not been explored in the literature, and we do not have a clear understanding of the relationship between transformational leadership working within a distributed leadership culture and its impact on effectiveness in different contexts.

Currently, research falls short of understanding how different leadership styles impact different contexts, especially with regard to the complexity of contexts within alternative schools. One leadership perspective believes a good leader is a good leader regardless of context, based on their use of a repertoire of skills. Another perspective examines leadership from the organization’s needs and believes that a misalignment of leadership style with the school’s philosophy of education and leadership culture can lead to conflict and shift or weaken the sustainability of innovation.

According to Bloom and Unterman (2014, 290-291), school reform efforts have historically been based on creating alternative learning options outside the traditional school
system (e.g. charter schools), or efforts from within the district that include reforming a school (e.g. school within a school) or creating new school structures. There may be a different relationship between leadership style and context depending on whether the goal is to create or sustain school reform or whether the goal is to create or sustain innovation through new school structures. It seems that while they are similar and oftentimes overlap, there is a distinction between the two, and this distinction appears to be an overlooked area of research.

Sustaining Innovation

Another key finding from studies included in this literature review described sustainability challenges innovative schools face—challenges of sustaining the survival of the school during times of funding cuts, and sustaining the school’s innovative philosophy and culture during transitions in leadership, high teacher turnover, and state or district mandates that are in opposition to the school’s philosophy and result in a shift in culture. An area in need of further exploration is to better understand how innovative schools have been sustained.
Chapter 3: Research Design

Research Rationale

A review of extant literature on alternative education identified three main claims that frame the rationale for this research project: (1) Traditional educational provisions are insufficient to meet the needs of all students; (2) Alternative provisions have had some success in meeting the academic needs of underserved students; (3) There is a need for additional understanding of the characteristics of effective alternatives—complicated by the lack of an agreed-upon definition of “alternative,” and a lack of in-depth analyses and comparisons of different types of provisions.

To address these identified needs, this study explored the leadership and organizational characteristics of effective district-operated alternative high schools. Case study methodology was utilized to gather in-depth data on each school and provide ample material for rich, comparative analyses. The following research questions guided the study:

1. How do alternative schools develop parent and community ties, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers?

2. How is the professional capacity of alternative education teachers developed, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers?

3. How do alternative schools create a student-centered learning climate, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers?

4. How is instructional guidance provided in alternative schools, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers?
5. How do alternative schools provide student support services, as perceived by principals and teachers?

6. What is the relationship between the presence of the CCSR *Framework of Essential Supports* (Leadership & Organizational supports) and alternative school context?

7. What are the leadership characteristics of principals in effective alternative schools, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers?

**Case Study Methodology**

Due to the complex, nontraditional nature of alternative schools, exploratory case study methodology was utilized in order to better understand the leadership and organizational characteristics of these schools, and describe how these characteristics are manifested. According to Yin (2003, 1), “In general, case studies are the preferred strategy when ‘how’ or ‘why’ questions are being posed.” Furthermore, case study methodology is “used in many situations to contribute to our knowledge of individual, group, organizational, social, political, and related phenomena” (Yin 2003, 1).

**Selection of Schools**

Schools were selected for this study based on the following criteria:

1. With a focus on the *leadership* and *organizational* characteristics of schools, it was important to limit this study to *schools*, not *programs* located within a traditional school or operating under the umbrella of a traditional school. Therefore, only schools having their own BEDS code with the NYSED, and located separate from their traditional counterparts were selected for this study.
2. Due to the literature review’s emphasis on the importance of students graduating from high school with a diploma, high schools were selected for this study. And, the graduation requirement or purpose of the high school had to be a high school diploma, not a GED.

3. Since the vast majority of students are currently enrolled in public school districts, this study focused specifically on alternative schools operated by public school districts. This excluded private alternatives, BOCES, and charter schools.

4. With a primary focus on better understanding the leadership and organizational characteristics of effective alternative provisions, only schools considered In Good Standing with the NYSED were selected.

Schools were identified by those who indicated their primary focus was “Alternative Education School” on the NYSED BEDS School Data Form. Additional data for each of these schools included grade levels, and number of administrators and teachers. From the list of schools that self-identified as “Alternative Education School” with programs operated by “This school,” additional selection criteria were implemented based on whether they served high school students and size of the school based on student population and number of teachers. Only schools with at least 30 students and at least 3 teachers were selected. Of those schools, two were purposely selected for three primary reasons: (1) They had similar community demographics; (2) They had similar district demographics; (3) They took two different approaches to alternative education—providing additional opportunities for comparative analyses.
Once study approval was granted by the dissertation committee and the University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), initial contacts were made with the superintendent of each district to describe the study’s purpose and protocols, and request permission for participation. Upon approval from each superintendent, secondary contacts were made to the principal/school leader of each school, again, explaining the study and requesting their permission and participation. With approval, school leaders communicated with all their teachers that the study would be taking place and that some of them would receive email communication from me with an invitation to participate.

Each school leader (principal) provided a list of all teachers and their email addresses. Due to the limited number of teachers in one school, all teachers received an invitation to participate; three teachers in the other school were randomly selected, with the only criteria that they have at least two years’ experience at the school.

All participants—superintendents, school principals/leader, and teachers were outreached by email with an introduction to the study and an invitation to participate. Each participant received a Recruitment Letter introducing me as the researcher, purpose of the study, protocol, and a description of what their participation would entail—short demographic survey (leaders), individual interview, and anticipated length of interview. Each participant also received a copy of a Consent Form which was signed at the beginning of each interview. Consent Forms reiterated the protocols to be used for the study and their individual rights as a participant, including voluntary participation.

Data Collection

Data for this study were collected from three primary sources:
1. **Public data on each community, district, and school.** Community data were primarily acquired from the U.S. Census Bureau and included: number of residents, ethnicity, highest level of education attained, homeownership rate, median household income, and poverty level. District and school data were acquired from individual district websites and NYSED documents, including district and school report cards. Descriptive data from these sources included: Number of students in each district and school, percent of students eligible for free or reduced price lunch, annual per pupil expenditures, special education classification rates, and school-specific data that included Regents exam scores, percent receiving Regents diplomas, total number of non-completers, and students’ post-secondary plans.

2. **Demographic survey responses from all leaders.** Leaders completed a short demographic survey at the beginning of their interviews. These surveys included the following questions: gender, number of years as leader of the school, number of years previously served as a teacher, whether they were hired by the current superintendent, whether their position was full or part-time, whether they were “placed” or chose the leadership position, and future plans.

3. **Interview data collected from all participants.** Interview guides relied heavily on the previous instrument created by Lisy-Macan (2012), and based on the framework of the *Five Essential Supports* identified by Bryk et al. (2010). All participants were asked questions about their school’s mission and effectiveness, and the *Five Essential Supports* (Leadership, Instructional Guidance, Student-centered Learning Climate, Teachers’ Capacity and Commitment, and Parent-community Ties). In addition, based on their importance in the review of literature on alternative schools, school
principals/leaders and teachers were asked specifically about support services provided to students in their schools. Leaders (superintendents, principals, school leader) were also asked to reflect on their role and learnings as a leader.

Based on “future recommendations” identified by Lisy-Macan (2012), all participants—superintendents, principals/school leader, and teachers—participated in individual interviews, not focus groups. Interview times and locations were established via email correspondence, and all teachers were given the option to meet at a location separate from their school in order to provide the highest degree of anonymity. Of interest, all participants chose to interview at locations within their school buildings. The length of interviews ranged from 45 minutes to more than 90 minutes, depending on participants’ time availability and length of responses.

Validity of Methods

The foundation for the guiding questions and interview instrument used for this study was based on the framework of the Five Essential Supports discovered in Bryk et al.’s (2010) extensive study of effective urban elementary school reform efforts. The interview guide relied heavily on Lisy-Macan’s (2012) instrument—similarly based on the Five Essential Supports—used in her dissertation study of leaders’ theories of action in effective traditional elementary and middle schools in rural upstate New York. Adding to the knowledge discovered in these studies, this dissertation utilized the framework of the Five Essential Supports as a lens through which to examine the leadership and organizational characteristics of effective alternative schools.

In order to strengthen the development of theory based on findings from this study, two different schools were selected from two different districts for comparative analyses, and findings from this study were also compared with those from Bryk et al. (2010) and Lisy-Macan
Furthermore, including three different levels (groups) of participants (superintendents, principals/school leader, and teachers) allowed for comparisons of responses within and between each group. This triangulation provided further evidence of the validity of participant responses and helped form a more complete picture of how these schools operate.

The following chart indicates the interview questions used to answer the guiding research questions for this study. (See Appendices for Interview Guides.)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Questions</th>
<th>Data Sources</th>
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| 1. How do alternative schools develop parent and community ties, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers? | Superintendent Interview Guide: VI. 43-50  
Principals Interview Guide: VII. 39-44  
Teacher Interview Guide: VII. 22-26 |
| 2. How is the professional capacity of alternative education teachers developed, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers? | Superintendent Interview Guide: V. 35-42  
Principals Interview Guide: VI. 33-38  
Teacher Interview Guide: VI. 18-21 |
| 3. How do alternative schools create a student-centered learning climate, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers? | Superintendent Interview Guide: IV. 26-34  
Principals Interview Guide: V. 27-32  
Teacher Interview Guide: V. 13-17 |
| 4. How is instructional guidance provided in alternative schools, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers? | Superintendent Interview Guide: III. 19-25  
Principals Interview Guide: IV. 21-26  
Teacher Interview Guide: IV. 8-12 |
| 5. How do alternative schools provide student support services, as perceived by principals and teachers? | Principals Interview Guide: II. 8  
Teacher Interview Guide: II. 4 |
| 6. What is the relationship between the presence of the CCSR Framework of Essential Supports (Leadership & Organizational supports) and alternative school context? | Superintendent Interview Guide: II. 16-17; III. 25; IV. 32-34; V. 41-42; VI. 49-50  
Principals Interview Guide: III. 19-20; IV. 26; V. 32; VI. 38; VII. 44 |
| 7. What are the leadership characteristics of principals in effective alternative schools, as perceived by superintendents, principals, and teachers? | Superintendent Interview Guide: II. 7-18; III 20; IV. 27; V. 36; VI. 44; VII. 51-54  
Principals Interview Guide: III. 9-20; IV. 22; V. 28; VI. 34; VII. 40; VIII. 45-51  
Teacher Interview Guide: III. 5-7; IV. 9-10; V. 14; VI. 19; VII. 23 |
Data Analysis

With permission granted by each participant, interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher. Without changing their original intent, interview quotes were modified to protect the identity of the schools and participants. NVIVO software was used initially to identify themes and patterns in participant responses. A “template analysis” (King 1998) approach was used with initial primary codes pre-identified by Bryk et al.’s (2010) *Five Essential Supports* and subsequent codes that emerged through frequency in responses to follow-up or probing questions. Similarly, the case study technique described by Yin (2003, 116) as “pattern-matching” was used to compare responses or themes for each school separately. These themes were compared between “same level” participants (e.g., teachers) and between different levels (superintendents, school leaders, teachers) within each school. This created a rich description of each school (as outlined in chapters 4 and 5), based on collective responses of participants. A cross case analysis (as outlined in chapter 6) was then conducted by comparing “patterns” found between the different schools.

Similarities and differences discovered within and between schools contribute to the development of a theory about alternative education. According to Yin (2003, 116), the “internal validity” of the study’s results are strengthened when “patterns coincide.” Differences in patterns within a school or between schools create opportunities for further analyses of other indicators that could account for the differences, again, adding to the theory development.

Initial analyses of the data were conducted—creating a descriptive outline of each school and common themes that emerged when comparing the different schools. Comparisons were
also made with findings from previous research outlined in the literature review. The researcher then met with dissertation committee members to engage in a peer review process during which the identified themes, patterns, and initial findings were discussed. This discussion provided clarity and improved organization. Recommendations were made for additional comparisons with current literature and understandings in the field, and a challenge was presented toward the development of theory.

**Member Checking**

Once interview data were transcribed and a description of each school was drafted, follow-up communication was made with each participant by email thanking them for their participation in the study, offering each a copy of their individual transcript, and requesting their assistance with the member checking process.

Leaders received an emailed copy of their transcript, and teachers were given the option to receive a copy of their transcript by email or a hard copy by mail to their home address. Of interest, some participants declined receiving a copy. All participants also received an individual “Member Check” document containing quotes and information selected from their individual interview to be used in the dissertation document. Each participant was asked to verify the accuracy of the information in his/her “Member Check” document, provide clarity or correction wherever necessary, and email their edits or comments back to the researcher. A response was received from all participants.

**Delimitations and Limitations**

Delimitations of this dissertation study include the following:
1. With a specific interest in studying alternative school provisions operated by public school districts, traditional and other “types” of alternatives were excluded (as previously described).

2. In order to keep the scope of the study feasible for a single researcher, the following limitations were imposed:
   a. Schools included in the study were located in New York State.
   b. Participants were limited to school and district leaders and teachers. Students, parents, and community members were not included in the study.
   c. All teachers were not invited to participate—a random sample was selected.
   d. With the goal focused more on depth than breadth, the number of schools selected for in-depth analyses was limited to two.

3. Due to the complex, and largely unknown nature of alternative programs, case study methodology was selected over quantitative methods (e.g. surveys).

4. The focus of the study was limited to the interview guide questions based heavily on Lisy-Macan’s (2012) instrument and grounded in the framework of the Five Essential Supports developed by Bryk et al. (2010).

The following limitations of this study were also acknowledged:

1. Both alternative schools were schools of choice for principals, teachers, and students—implying that study participants (principals/school leader and teachers) felt a personal alignment with their school’s philosophy and mission.

2. Due to the small sample size, and because these are particular examples of alternative education, findings are not generalizable to the larger field of alternative education.
3. Interview data were based on participants’ perceptions of the leadership and organizational characteristics of their schools.

4. The quality of the data collected relied on the accuracy of the participants’ responses. The researcher did not conduct observations.

5. Although somewhat mitigated by the Member Checking process, the accuracy of participants’ responses was limited to their individual abilities to “top of mind” or “on the spot” recollect and accurately articulate their perceptions.

6. Interviews were conducted at the end of the school year, at a time of many year-end activities (e.g. parent/student meetings, graduations, exams). These activities, and potential time pressures and emotions may have influenced participants’ perceptions. Participants’ responses were collected at one specific point in time and may not be reflective of their answers at other times of the year, or under different conditions.

7. Superintendents offered some comparisons between the alternative school and traditional schools in their districts, but without including traditional school leaders and teachers in the study, comparative analyses were primarily limited to superintendents’ responses about their roles or expectations between the two.

8. With only one superintendent and principal for each school, there were a limited number of leadership perspectives.

9. The quality of data received and reported is dependent on the interview skills, analysis acumen, writing ability, and biases of the researcher.
Chapter 4: Alternative School A

Description of School A Community & District

School District A is located in a small city in New York State with a population of over 90% white residents, making it significantly less diverse than the general population of New York State which has 66% white. Slightly more than 90% of the city’s population over age 25 graduated from high school, compared with 85% state-wide; and over 30% has earned at least a bachelor’s degree, comparable with the statewide percentage. The median household income is just under $45,000, well below the State median of $57,683. Eighteen percent of the population lives below the poverty level, slightly higher than the rest of the state at 15% (U.S. Census Bureau).

According to the New York State Education Department (NYSED), the district is designated as Average Need/Resource Capacity meaning the ratio of student needs to local resources falls between the 20th and 70th percentiles on the index in comparison with other schools in the state. Thirty-five percent of students in the district are eligible for free or reduced price lunch. The total per pupil annual expenditure for District A is just under $17,000, less than the average for similar districts of $18,876.

History & Description of School A

A little over ten years ago, School District A identified a problem. Too many academically capable students were dropping out of their traditional high schools—approximately 4% annually. A federal grant became available and a strategic planning committee was formed to create an alternative school that would better meet the needs of
disconnected students. The committee consisted of school district personnel (teachers and administrators), community business leaders, parents, and a representative from the local college.

Members of the committee visited successful alternative schools across the nation and chose strategies that would meet the unique needs of students in their district. According to the current school leader who at the time was a teacher in the district and a member of the original planning committee, “the goal was right from the start to create an exemplar for this type of education, so I liked that . . . there was a level of professionalism about this from the start that said, ‘Let’s not do this halfway. Let’s make this something that is replicable, usable elsewhere.’” He further stated, “This wasn’t ever just a place that said, ‘Let’s figure out how we can crank out more diplomas.’ It was never a place where we . . . ever considered being a dumping ground.”

Alternative School A’s current structure closely resembles the original vision created by the planning committee. It is located on a local college campus, separate from the traditional high schools. According to the school leader, this alternative location is “an important part of . . . getting [students] out of a place where they’ve been unsuccessful and away from a place where they might have reputations . . . It’s very powerful to say you have a brand new fresh start. You are on this college campus now. You are part of a different community.”

The superintendent further stated that “the location of the school and the relationship that the school and district have with [the college] leadership is one of the main reasons that school has been so successful.” The school pays one dollar a year to the college for classroom space, utilities, cleaning, and maintenance. According to the current school leader, “we don’t have a secretary and we don’t have a nurse. We’ve got our first aid kit and whoever is closest to the phone in the office.”
Alternative School A consists of five full-time staff including a lead teacher (school leader) who also teaches history classes, an English teacher, science teacher, math teacher and a guidance counselor. In addition to the on-campus staff, there is a part-time (less than 10%) principal who also serves as a full-time assistant principal at a traditional high school in the district.

The maximum enrollment is forty students with an average class size ranging from seven to ten. The school principal believes the size of the school is important in achieving its mission. “You can’t make the school too big or you’ll lose the individual, and that’s the whole reason the [school] was started. They don’t go above forty for a reason.” The principal further stated, “I think we have a bigger need for [what the school is doing] . . . I’m not sure [how to address it], but for us, the answer is not expanding the [school].” With an emphasis on developing positive relationships with individual students, the superintendent further stated, “In the regular system, we know from experience some teachers and administrators can do that very naturally, some can’t. But, the larger the number of kids, even the most talented people . . . you’re not going to connect with all of them because there’s just too many of them.”

The school follows its own academic calendar based on year-round trimesters, allowing students to enter and graduate three times a year. School A’s educational format consists of three components: academic classes, community service, and part-time paid employment at least fifteen hours per week. Teachers at School A work daily from 10:00 a.m. - 5:30 p.m., and students are required to be on campus from 2:00 p.m. - 5:00 p.m. for instruction time. One hundred percent attendance is required; students are required to make up any missed days. During the morning hours students work in the community at local businesses or nonprofit organizations, participate in community service projects, or receive individual help from teachers.
at the school; teachers collect student timesheets in the community, meet with employers and mentors, and convene as a group to plan the day/week and discuss individual student needs. At 2:00 p.m., the school day begins with a time when all staff and students meet together, discuss upcoming activities and events, share current learnings, address questions or concerns, and all participate in a breathing/relaxing exercise that helps them put aside the challenging situations many of them face outside the school and set their minds to engage in learning. At the conclusion of this time together, students and teachers are in classes until 5:00 p.m.

A local family foundation financially supports the school’s arts education programs at community organizations and provides funding needed to cover student employment wages. When the original federal start-up grant funding expired, the school district was able to absorb the cost of the school for several years until 2008 when state funding for education changed. At that time, the district outreached a local corporate foundation that had been actively involved with the development of the school from the beginning. The foundation agreed to cover all salaries, benefits and associated costs. Currently, the superintendent believes the district has trimmed expenses and if New York State aid continues to trickle upwards, the district will no longer need to rely on the foundation to sustain the school. The superintendent also believes that there is significant support for the alternative school at the district and board level, and stated, “I can tell you the board . . . if it really came down to it . . . if [the foundation] said, ‘No, we’re not giving you the money,’ the board would cut five teacher [positions] somewhere else to keep this program.”

Target Population

According to the school leader, the mission of the school is “to reconnect disconnected youth.”
The superintendent further described the target population as students who just didn’t have a connection in the [traditional] school for whatever reason. Students who had attendance issues, family issues, limited amounts of friends; kids that we saw as maybe being lonely or disinterested, and we really stayed away from the kids who we viewed as being really behavior issues—the kids that were fighting . . . We really wanted kids who just needed a smaller student-to-teacher ratio and really identified them early on . . . kids who . . . could really benefit from that relationship because it’s a bit of a family atmosphere. That’s what it becomes . . . They get to know one another extremely well.

The current principal and source of student referrals to the school added, the target population is “students that have for whatever reason fallen through the cracks.”

Alternative School A is a school of choice. It is open to students ages 16-19 who live in the district, are academically capable (within one standard deviation of the norm in reading, writing, and math), and have either dropped out or are at-risk of dropping out of the traditional school. All students interested in attending the school complete an application, including a referral from a teacher, counselor, principal or employer, receive parent permission, visit the school, and participate in an interview before acceptance. The interview is an important part of the application process. As the school leader stated, “It’s like a job. You have to apply to get here. Students must demonstrate a commitment to attempt to change some of the factors that have been getting in the way of success in the regular school.” He further stated, “we want to make sure they know why they would be a good fit here . . . we’re not just here to rescue [them], we want to know what [they] have to offer and how committed they are to making the necessary changes.”

The interview committee is comprised of all staff at the school, a representative from the college, an employer, a current student or graduate, and the former president of the local corporate foundation. (He was a member of the original school planning committee and has participated in every student interview except one since the school’s inception.) Each person at
the table has a different perspective on what it will take for the student to be successful at the school, and all of these inputs help determine whether the school will be a good fit for the student. According to one teacher,

We wanted to take them all in the beginning and there were many who were not ready or just didn’t have the abilities. They just weren’t ready to make the changes. We had a couple of rough years and our dropout rate was climbing, so we had to kind of stop and say, ‘What is going on here?’, but . . . since then, it has definitely improved. Our graduation rate has gone up and up . . . So, if we can keep the maturity level up and really try to make sure we are taking the kids who are ready to make the changes, and we’ll take risks, but we don’t necessarily take them all anymore.

If the committee decides not to accept a student, they provide recommendations on how the student can make improvements and reapply during the next open period. According to the superintendent, the school takes a “there will be no casualties” approach to working with students. “Their take from the beginning is ‘you are going to graduate.’”

When students are accepted to the school, they spend two full days with teachers reviewing the guiding principles and expectations of the school that were developed by the founding committee and heavily grounded in William Glasser’s Choice Theory with an overarching emphasis on developing leadership skills. The guiding principles (e.g. mutual respect, excellence, integrity, shared responsibility, and leadership) are displayed on the wall at the school and saturate everyday interactions within the school, serving as goals to work toward and used as learning opportunities during discussions with students.

After an orientation time with teachers, new students spend a day with veteran students who provide them with advice and encouragement. At the culmination of the orientation period, new students conduct an open house to introduce the school to their parents/guardians and significant people in their lives. According to the school leader, “The goal of orientation is to teach new students the culture of the school as quickly as possible.”
Graduation requirements for the school align with requirements for the New York State Regents Diploma and the twenty-two credit requirement of the school district. In addition, students must have worked and volunteered in the community, have a plan for their future, completed a graduation presentation of learning summarizing their experience, and be in good standing with 100% attendance by making up time for any missed days.

Mission Evaluation

According to the superintendent, “[The school is] probably the number one grassroots program the district has ever created . . . because we can say it saved this many lives, and at this point we’re in the hundreds. Many of these kids have gone on to college, or they’re working and solid citizens, parents. It is an amazing thing.”

The superintendent further stated, “I think we’re up to 250 plus graduates . . . That’s a lot of kids . . . [who] otherwise were going to drop out of school. That, to me, is impressive.”

While reflecting on Alternative School A’s effectiveness in achieving its mission, the superintendent added, “I think [its] wildly successful. Does every student graduate? No. Do we have drops? Absolutely we do. But if you look at the number of students who graduate every year, the number of students who stay in school who were drops or would have been drops, it’s wildly successful.” He further stated that students who drop out of the alternative school usually “have drug or alcohol involvement or . . . [are] in the court system. Very rarely is it a kid who . . . [has an] attendance issue or a teenage parent who just has difficulty time wise making it all work.”
Interviews with teachers and administrators of School A occurred at the end of the school year. As the school principal reflected on the effectiveness of the school, he referred to the results he had just received for the spring Regents exams scores:

[The alternative school does] exceptionally well on state tests . . . Their passing rate is always exceptional, and that’s across the board. All of the tests that they’ve taken during this spring are done. They exceeded our passing rate at [the traditional school] in all but one, and that was global studies. With that being said, they don’t have nearly the number of students getting 85 or above, but to know the population of students, that’s exceptional. Many of these students are students that I referred there . . . and they gave me a run for my money. So, to see them succeed is very humbling because they are doing something that we couldn’t do in the regular environment.

The principal further reflected on the alternative school’s graduation the previous night, stating, “There was one [graduate] in particular that really gave me a hard time. To see him then graduate is very fulfilling. I think sometimes they actually enjoy saying to me, ‘I told you I could do it,’ and I don’t ever tell them they can’t, but they remember back when I was chasing them around the halls of [the traditional] school, and it wasn’t working out and then they eventually get to graduate and many of them go on to college, so it’s very successful.”

Alternative School A has its own Basic Education Data System (BEDS) code with the NYSED meaning it is a stand-alone school, held solely accountable for its results. The school leader believes it is beneficial for the school to have its own BEDS code, stating,

We wanted as much autonomy as possible. Although we realized our data was going to be skewed in some ways because of our population, we thought it was important to be as stand-alone as possible so we could justify things on our own terms. Plus, times could still be tenuous, so we didn’t want to be something that anybody thought they could absorb . . . We’re talking about a whole school here . . . We’re not a program. We’re a school because of that.

Because they are a school, and not a program within a school, the superintendent believes they feel, “a little bit more pressure about graduating kids on time than maybe they did early on . . . I think because of No Child Left Behind and accountability.” But, he further stated that there
have been instances when “kids could have graduated, but they purposely kept them for an extra semester because they just felt like they needed a little bit more maturity before they sent them on their way.”

The principal also stated,

The state looks at the number of students who graduate in four years and that’s unfortunate because if they need to stay an additional year . . . they should be able to do that without penalty . . . It’s still an accomplishment to stay five years and graduate for these students, and actually, maybe more-so because they stuck it out an additional year and did what they needed to do and had challenges that no other students might have had. Just graduating, not dropping out, is a constant battle with some of the students there, even when they’re in that environment.

The superintendent was clear to say that he and the Board of Education do not apply pressure to the school to graduate students on time, and stated, “It’s from the state and federal government and the whole idea of being [labeled a] ‘School In Need of Improvement.’ It’s hardly a school that needs any improvement. It really is a model.” The superintendent further explained that the NYSED has recently worked with the district to develop alternative measures for accountability that more accurately assess the school’s graduation rate. Part of this is due to the school’s calendar which is based on year-round trimesters with graduations three times each year.

While graduation rates and Regents exam scores provide evidence of the academic rigor and the school’s success, primary emphasis at the district and school level is on developing the whole student and helping them make connections. Because of this expanded view of education, the school leader believes,

our graduation results don’t always reflect the true success. It says 100% of our students were expected to be unsuccessful in a traditional high school, 70% of them graduate [from the alternative school] . . . 28% of [the others] we don’t consider failures at all because they came here, they benefitted, they were engaged, they established
connections. That still happened. [Many felt comfortable enough] after having this experience on the college campus that we see a lot of those students as [college] students. They’ll come back in and say, ‘I’m entering college, just wanted to say thanks a lot. Do you mind if I stop by the room for help if I need it sometimes?’

In summary, School A was established as an alternative school of choice for at-risk students, defined as those who have been unsuccessful in the traditional school environment. For the purposes of this study, the school is considered successful due to its NYSED accountability rating of “In Good Standing” for graduation rates.

The following sections lay out findings from interviews with teachers and school administrators that further explore the characteristics of this school, through the lens of Bryk et al.’s (2010) Framework of Essential Supports for School Improvement, to better understand how it successfully connects disconnected students. These supports include: Leadership, Parent-Community Ties, Teachers’ Capacity & Commitment (Professional Capacity), Student-Centered Learning Climate, and Instructional Guidance (Ambitious Instruction).

Leadership

Teachers’ Perceptions of School A’s Leadership

According to the Framework of Essential Supports and Contextual Resources for School Improvement, “Leadership does not rest solely with the school principal. Instead, improving students’ learning and performance requires leadership from the faculty, the parents, and the community” (Sebring et al. 2006, 9).

School A has a nontraditional school leadership structure. There is a part-time principal who is located off-campus where he serves full-time as the assistant principal of a traditional high school in the district. One teacher explained the principal’s role stating, “We don’t see him very often. If we need a signature, he does that. . . . He comes up on occasion. He comes to our
events, open house, art openings, and we see him for observations . . . Other than that, if we need something we call him, but we usually do as much as we can on our own.” Another teacher explained that part of the principal’s role is “to understand that we are proceeding correctly and not in violation of any policies in the school district . . . as well as keep us informed of anything that’s going on outside.”

There is a lead teacher (referred to throughout this study as “school leader”) who is on-campus full-time, and in addition to his daily teaching duties fills the role most similar to a traditional principal. According to the teachers, the role of the school leader includes being a liaison with the principal, superintendent, and other district administrators to be sure the needs of the school are being met, and that they are in compliance with district and state expectations. He also meets with traditional school personnel to identify new student referrals, keeps teachers abreast of professional development opportunities, makes connections with individuals and organizations throughout the community, writes applications and reports for funding, and develops the school calendar.

One teacher explained, “[The school leader is] the one with the vision. [But], day-to-day we do it all together. I think it’s really a team effort . . . There are times when some decisions have to be made immediately and solely, but we really try to make sure that we have everybody’s opinion before we make decisions, especially if they are important ones.”

The school was established from the beginning with a shared leadership model, shared between the school leader, teachers, and a full-time guidance counselor. All staff persons have specific roles they are responsible for, based on their individual strengths – not according to hierarchy.
While the teachers believe they share in the decision-making process, and “are all equally important,” they identified specific attributes of the school leader that they believe contribute to the school’s overall success. One teacher stated,

[He] displays a great deal of patience, of willingness to compromise. He knows us all and knows when to reel some of us in and when to . . . if we’re getting a little too emotionally invested in something that’s going on with a student, he knows how to look at the big picture and ultimately his motives are always to do what’s best for the school and what’s best for the individual students . . . He’s got a great sense of humor, great attitude. He’s always looking for more and more things for the students to do, to participate in. He’s willing to go the extra mile.

Another teacher believes, “[The school leader’s] vision . . . that overall [view of] this is how things should be working, and that overall view of how we want our month to go or how we want our year to go, and he comes up with good ideas . . . He’s not so great at details, but his vision is important and it does keep us going and keeps morale up for the most part.” This teacher also stated that the school leader’s strength is in relating to the students. He’s “really good at . . . helping them understand when their actions need to change; helping them understand how their words might hurt somebody.” And another teacher stated that, “he’s always proactive in terms of whether it’s a student not representing us well, or a student needing help, or an opportunity for us to be more visible to the public.”

School leader’s Perceptions of School A’s Leadership

The school leader also described the leadership structure of the school as, “Flat. There are five staff members, I’m called the lead teacher [school leader], but we [the teachers and guidance counselor] almost always share in the decision making.”

The original leader of the school retired after the first seven years, and the school went through a change in “lead teacher” when the current leader, who was actively involved in the school’s creation and had been a teacher there from the beginning, stepped into the position.
While their commitment to the mission and shared leadership philosophy were similar, there were differences in their strengths which required some shifts in the needed skills of the other members of the team. As the current school leader stated, “I think it’s a matter of resettling into those roles, but I think where it feels like it is now, we are all just our little cogs . . . for the most part we just do our things and the machine works fine. It feels flat, it doesn’t feel like there’s hierarchy. I think that’s a strength.” When asked who keeps him on track with regard to overall school effectiveness, he stated, “It’s the team [teachers and guidance counselor] . . . we hold ourselves accountable. There’s no line. No separation. It’s just us and it’s this school.”

The school leader believes they as a team have flexibility at the school to be innovative and creative, and he stated, “Believe me, it happens here. You wake up at three in the morning with an idea and it could be policy the next day . . . Policy might be too strong a word, but it could certainly have the agreement or consent of the staff and students and it could be a new direction.”

In preparation for his role as leader, the school leader took graduate classes to become a certified administrator. He believes these courses helped me understand the big picture within a school, within a larger school, within a school district, within the state . . . What I found, [is that] it so reinforced what we were doing here . . . we do some really good things here that if more people did large scale would be more effective—that would be good ways of dealing with current issues in regular schools and we’ve got a pretty darn good model. It might not all be perfectly replicable, but there’s enough really good aspects of it, that big or small, fits.

When asked if he feels pressure in any way as the leader of the school, he replied, “I feel responsible to make sure that as long as I’m here we continue to improve all the time. We’re not resting on our laurels. I’m not afraid of failure, but there’s a responsibility to make sure that
we’re fine-tuning this and making it better and better all the time which if you really look at a curve when we started, it has happened.”

He further reflected on his role as the leader of the school, stating,

I became a teacher because I never had a teacher that I felt like could [get] through to me. That’s part of the reason I wanted to do it, and as my career in education progressed, it just became more and more realized. As a leader it’s the same sort of thing. We’ve got to stay engaged and connected. It’s got to seem like it’s worthwhile. It’s got to be satisfying. [There has] to be a reason to do it. So whether it’s the students coming to school, or the employer hiring our student, or the funders funding our art class, or the teacher coming here . . . offering as much contribution as they do to this school, it’s got to be satisfying. So, my job as a leader is to make sure we’ve got mutually satisfying arrangements in everything we do. If that’s working, then the teachers are going to come back, the students are going to come back, the funding is going to come back, the employers are going to come back, and we’re going to keep doing this, and it’s going to keep working.

He further stated that his success as a leader relies on, “flexibility, compassion, and high expectations”, with everyone, everything across the board.

With regard to the amount of interaction he has with school district administrators, the school leader believes the Board of Education is supportive, partially due to expressed support from the superintendent and the director of secondary education. And, all Board members have visited the school or have had positive experiences hiring students from the school. The school leader does not have regularly scheduled meetings with the principal or superintendent. He explained that his interaction with the superintendent includes occasional visits to his office to say, ‘Hi’ or fill him in on things at the school. The superintendent was the second principal of the school, and the school leader feels he has been very supportive. The district’s director of secondary education is very involved in School A’s events, and she, too, was a former principal of the alternative school. According to the school leader, because discipline issues are mostly
handled on campus, there is limited contact with the school principal; it is more a matter of touching base to keep him informed of students leaving or returning to the school.

School Principal’s Perceptions of School A’s Leadership

The principal of School A has been a school administrator for five years with part of his duties as the alternative school principal during the past two years. He is a full-time assistant principal at one of the traditional high schools in the district, a feeder school from which he makes referrals to the alternative school.

When the district was looking for a principal of the alternative school two years ago, he expressed interest in the position and was subsequently assigned. He was a special education teacher before becoming an administrator, so he believes “it was a natural fit . . . the students that are there are at-risk for sure, so it’s kind of a natural transition that makes a lot of sense.”

The principal does not have a set schedule for when he is on the alternative school campus. When there are obligations at the traditional school, his visits are sporadic. But, he believes that “even though I spend a limited amount of time there, [the staff] knows they can count on me when they need me.” The principal further explained, “I want to be there more often. Those are the students that I gravitate towards, and they gravitate towards me and so I wish that I could spend more time there, and I continue to struggle with finding ways to do that.”

The principal believes the “nuts and bolts” of his job are the same in the traditional high school and the alternative school, but he stated,

When I go to the [alternative school] to visit, I feel a lot less pressure. I think because the structure is so strong and the staff is so strong. It’s still a job when I go up there, but it’s a different feel. It’s comfortable for the students and for me, and I think it would help me professionally to be there more around those students to be honest. The running of a traditional high school is extremely strenuous, and to go up into an environment where
the students are appreciative of the opportunity to be a part of such a program is refreshing and re-energizes me.

According to the principal, “About 10% of my time is spent on [alternative school] activities. Any given day I might not deal with [the school] at all. There are some days, like yesterday, that it’s a good portion of my day because we had graduation. I do evaluations and all the things that need to get done, the tedious things that need to get done. But, it’s a place that definitely runs [itself]. It’s because of what [the staff has] put in place. It’s because of the structures that they’ve put in place.”

When asked how his role differs from that of the school leader, he stated, “A lot of what I end up having to do relates to deadlines for different things for the state or observations or things of that nature. I’m sure [the school leader] is happy that’s not on his plate, and it leaves him more available [for] . . . the mission and vision and keeping the school in line with what they’ve been doing for the last ten years.”

The principal also stated the school leader deals with the day-to-day discipline issues at the school, if there are any. In the two years he has served as principal, he has only been contacted concerning two incidents, both of which put students at risk of hurting themselves. According to the principal, there is no violence at all. If there were a fight, a student would be asked to leave, and students are aware of that expectation. For less serious offenses or repeat misbehaviors, students are put “on contract” outlining clearer expectations for them to remain in the school.

The principal stated that the keeper of the mission, the vision, the driver of the overall school culture and climate, is the role of the school leader partly because he has been there since the beginning. The principal was a teacher in the district when the school was created and stated,
I know from what I saw from the inception of the school, that core group that started the school, it meant the world to them and it still does. I think all of us have been smart enough that have been [principal] . . . not to change something that has worked, and respect what they have going on. I think all of us too . . . we make sure everyone knows that we don’t deserve any credit for what’s going on up there. They’re there every day. They’re putting time in, and the credit lies with the five people that are there every day. They are an amazing staff, and if it wasn’t for them, the structure would fall apart.

When the principal was asked if he feels a sense of overall responsibility for the school, he stated,

I do. I definitely do. We had an incident two days ago where a school van on the way to the school was involved in a minor accident. When I first heard about it, I didn’t know how minor it was. So, I dropped what I was doing. I can’t imagine anything that would take precedence over that . . . I went to the emergency room, and up to [the school], and tried to find out if there was anything else I could do . . . It was pretty minor, but I do feel a sense of responsibility. Maybe not on the day-to-day running of the school because I do feel the staff is so strong and the structure is set, and I don’t worry about it day-to-day.

When asked if his relationship with the teachers influence his thoughts and actions as the principal, he replied,

In this environment, it does affect my judgment because I trust them . . . I do know that part of this program, what’s made it successful, [is] trying new things . . . I think there’s a certain amount of risk that needs to be taken to reach the results that they have reached in the past several years. You can’t get through to the student population that we’re sending up there without taking some risks.

The principal talked further about trust, stating, “[I] trust their judgment. They’re not going to take on more than they can handle. I do think they push it sometimes to the very nth degree, but I appreciate that . . . they’re always looking for new ways to reach these kids and keep them involved.” The principal added, “I think all of us [principals] have had the sense to step back and let them do what they need to do and try some different things.”

The principal also believes his relationship with the school leader influences his thoughts or actions:
It’s really big. If [the school leader] needs something, or if he feels strongly about something, he calls me. We also have a personal friendship and that goes back fourteen years now, I guess. It’s funny how in this particular setting I let my emotions . . . kind of guide me a little more than I do in the other part of my job. It really is like students come first. That really is the focus, and you can say that, but I really think that they put it into play. That is the way that they do things and that sometimes can mean you’re not going by the book. They’re always on the edge of trying new things.

The principal and superintendent have also worked together for many years. The principal described their relationship stating,

He’s my mentor; he always has been . . . My first interaction with [him] was . . . [when he] was with a class of students labeled as [Emotionally Disturbed] with a lot of emotional issues . . . I saw how he built relationships with students, and I was like, ‘This is what I want to do’ . . . So, I had a connection with him like twenty years ago . . . I hope I gained his trust, and I know I trusted him even then. Then he came here as assistant principal when I was teaching . . . That furthered that relationship . . . ‘Students are the center of all we do’ is . . . [the superintendent], and that really is what the [alternative school] is about. I don’t think there can be a superintendent though [who is] more accepting. A superintendent that’s more willing to take risks . . . in part because he’s had luck with that. It’s worked out for him . . . I’m grateful that he’s willing to do that. And, I’ve been part of enough discussions where we’ve talked about budgets, and one of the first things that’s taken off the table is a potential cut to [the alternative school] . . . he knows how vital it is to not only our district, but the [city].

Superintendent’s Perceptions of School A’s Leadership

The superintendent of District A has been in this position for six years. He previously served as an assistant superintendent, principal, assistant principal, and teacher in the district.

According to the superintendent, the principal position at School A has “been a rotation of [traditional] high school assistant principals . . . I was the principal there for . . . two years.

Generally, it’s been one assistant principal after another. They move on to be a principal, then another assistant principal expresses interest.” By its eleventh year of operation, the school had eight principals. The superintendent looks for someone to fill that position who has the ability to understand the current staff, their out-of-the-box way of thinking, their different approach to problem solving, and as he explained, “the furthest thing from traditional. I would never put an
old school administrator with them. They would drive each other out of their minds.” He primarily looks for someone who values and is naturally able to develop positive relationships with students. He believes this intrinsic ability is important to the success of the school, and added, “I can teach them to be a principal. I can’t teach them how to develop a relationship with a kid.”

According to the superintendent, the primary role of the part-time alternative school principal is to manage the budgets, help with student discipline issues as needed, conduct teacher evaluations, and participate in graduation and staff meetings, as time permits. The principal of the school attends regular administrative meetings in the district and acts as a liaison between the alternative school and the district. He reports directly to the district director of secondary education, who reports to the superintendent.

While there is a formal principal of the school, according to the superintendent, “the governance of the school has really always been the staff,” and he views the school leader as the one who is responsible for the day-to-day operations of the school and its overall success. When the superintendent was asked who the school leader reports to, he laughed and said, “[the school leader] reports to all of us. When [he] really wants something, he comes to me. When he kind of wants something, he goes to [the director of secondary education]. When he wants something, he goes to [the principal].”

When further asked who keeps the school leader on track with regard to overall effectiveness, the superintendent stated, “I would say all of us. When I say all, it’s [the director of secondary education] and [me] mostly. Again, you monitor their attendance. The kids are
coming to school, they’re going to work, and they’re graduating five to six kids at a time, every trimester . . . But, [the oversight] is . . . [loose] and by feel.”

The superintendent believes this flexible chain of command structure is possible because of their relationships based on similar philosophies of education and years of working together. The superintendent previously served as assistant principal at one of the traditional high schools where the current alternative school leader was a teacher. The superintendent described their relationship saying,

One of the unique things here is when I was an assistant principal I became close with [the school leader] very quickly because he liked the way I worked with kids. I was not a traditional assistant principal. The kids used to say I was an assistant principal who would assign discipline with a smile on my face. And [the school leader] liked it that I was very clear that not every kid was the same. And the relationship was established then, and it was because of the way we both worked with kids. To this day . . . we can talk kids at any time, and he knows that.

The superintendent added that, “[The school leader] is very comfortable walking in [my office] and saying, ‘We want to go on this trip, any chance of providing the bus?’ That’s life with dealing with [the school leader]. We all accept it. He’s not always going to follow protocol. I think at times the principal feels a little out of the loop because [the school leader] is so comfortable coming to [the director of secondary education] and [me].”

The superintendent further stated that if there was an issue at the school, it would be addressed by an administrator, depending on the problem. The assistant superintendent for administrative services handles personnel-related issues, and the director of secondary education and the principal oversee anything related to curriculum or students. The superintendent added, “I would say that’s an area that concerns me long-term, especially as the faces change in the program . . . If [the school leader] were to leave, I would worry a lot about that, but because [the school leader] is a kind of pseudo-principal I don’t worry about it as much.”
When asked if he was referring to more structure and more oversight, clearer lines of communication, the superintendent replied,

You don’t want them to get away from the basic tenets of the program and why it was created. [The school leader] is the link to that and [the former school leader] is gone now . . . [One of the other original teachers will] be gone probably next year, and you’ve got new people who are wonderful and have bought-in, but it’s just that connection to why the program was ever formed that would be lost. So, then I would feel like there would be more of a leadership vacuum at that point.

He further stated that on a daily basis his expectations of the school leader are that students are safe, teachers and employers are meeting their responsibilities, and that he reports any concerns of student safety or potential litigation. The superintendent believes, “[The school leader] does a good job with all of those . . . He knows he can walk in [my office] anytime he wants. And he’s very good with letting us know what we need to know.”

When the superintendent was asked if his expectations for the alternative school leader differ from his expectations for traditional school principals, he stated,

By a lot. It’s far different. Because we are in this era of accountability, the [traditional] principals are really held accountable in terms of school performance, student performance, and supervision of teachers. With [the alternative school], it’s not quite the same. The supervision of teachers is important everywhere, but the accountability piece, we kind of dismiss it . . . If I line ten people up and say, ‘You’re all going to run the one hundred yard dash in under ten seconds,’ we all know that’s not going to happen. It’s the same concept here. Yes, it’s far different. For more traditional [school administrators], [I ask] ‘How are they following district policies?’ ‘Are they leaving our administrative meetings and doing what we agreed to do?’ Where this [alternative school] . . . ‘Are the kids coming to school?’ ‘Are they going to their jobs?’ ‘Are they participating in their classes?’ and ‘Do you see them graduating?’

Since the alternative school is held to the same state accountability standards as the traditional schools, the superintendent was asked why there is a difference in his expectations:

That’s a great question. I think because we’re measuring the success differently, and we’re looking at the kids differently. Admittedly, I think the idea with the students at [the
alternative school] is . . . First of all, we know that the kids are passing the exams there. But, it’s a different program with a different kind of kid, and not all kids are the same.

The superintendent further explained that for traditional school students, “the push is to get as many of them to the Advanced Regents Diploma as possible, where [at the alternative school] we’re not looking at that . . . it’s to help them graduate and get them connected with an employer or college so that after [graduation] they have the opportunity of having a life. Not that way in our [traditional] high schools currently.”

The superintendent believes a successful alternative school leader has to, “be ready to do things that would never be allowed in the regular school setting because you’re working with unique kids, with different needs, coming from different, crazy backgrounds.” As an example, he stated, “it’s everything from a kid that’s in a home where the parents are drug addicted, and this kid never really feeling love, so it’s making sure they have a Christmas, bring[ing] them to your house for Thanksgiving. All of these things have happened. Taking them shopping for school clothes. You don’t do that in the regular environment . . . occasionally it happens, but generally not.”

The superintendent added that the current school leader is successful in part because of, “his beliefs in the power of the relationship, and how he lives that every day . . . I don’t ever have to question that, and I have such a strong personal belief as an educator that the relationship will help get any kid through if you put the time in. And with [the school leader], I never have to worry about that. I know he will go to the ends of the earth to develop relationships with every one of those kids.”

The superintendent looks at his personal role as, “[The staff at the alternative school], they’re the troops on the ground fighting the war. I’m the guy that’s got to provide the supplies,
equipment, and air support to help them be successful. That’s how I really look at it,” and he supports the school leader in his success by

basically, when he says I need something for this particular reason, that’s all I need to hear because I trust him so much with these kids and that I know he is doing the right thing . . . I support him by when he walks in the door, shoots me an email and says, ‘Hey, I need you to call [a local employer], they haven’t paid one of our kids in six weeks,’ those are the kinds of things I need to do to support him. When I go to the [local corporate foundation] . . . and [request] money, I have my facts inside and out because I’ve got forty kids that need that money to have a chance at life. It’s basically by supporting him in whatever he thinks he needs to be successful. That’s how much I trust him.

The superintendent measures his own success by whether students are graduating, new students are applying to the school, both traditional high schools are referring students, the school is funded, and he stated, “I look a lot at the kids that graduate . . . They aren’t just turned loose in the community and that’s it. They’re done. Most of them have a connection to a career or further schooling.”

While the superintendent trusts and supports the alternative school staff, he also believes that they feel

At times probably isolated and not supported because they don’t see us as much as they’d like to; there’s not a connection to the district. There have been times we’ve made mistakes . . . We’ll have Teachers Recognition Week and send donuts to all the schools, but we’ll forget them . . . They are such a finely tuned machine that at times it’s almost out of sight, out of mind, to be honest . . . I think in some respects, they now have a closer relationship with [the college] than they do with us. It would be nothing for the former college president to wander into that room [at the alternative school] to just see what is going on, but they never see me. It’s location, and to remember that they are there. That’s one of the things I think we would all like to do better, to be honest. We’ve talked about that, being more of a physical presence at [the school].

When the superintendent was asked if he attempts to make the alternative and traditional schools similar, or connect them in ways other than through student referrals, he replied, “No. It’s a separate, stand-alone program that works well because of the people and their instincts with
working with kids . . . We’re not going to ever make them like the rest of our buildings. They wouldn’t be as successful if we did that. I firmly believe that.” As the superintendent reflected on advice he would give to new superintendents with alternative schools, he stated, “Be clear about the population of kids you want to serve because there are differences. Make sure you identify the skill set of the teacher you want prior to hiring. And only hire that. If you don’t get that in your first round of interviews, go to the next round . . . And I think location is key. I learned a valuable lesson here that I think having this program at the college has been one of the major reasons it has been so successful, outside of the talents of the staff.”

Parent-Community Ties

Sebring et al. (2006) measure parent involvement in two ways: “Teacher outreach to parents” and “parent involvement in the school” (Sebring et al. 2006, 22).

The principal of School A believes “the [school] does a great job of keeping parents involved if they want to be involved.” It is expected that each student and his/her parent or guardian visit the school before they submit an application for entrance. This is an important visit as parental permission is required for students to attend, and at times that can be challenging due to misconceptions about the school, and previous negative experiences with the traditional school. According to the school leader, “[we] do little things to at least get the parents to come here and sit down and learn a little more about [the school] . . . Rarely do they leave here and say, ‘I don’t want my child to come here.’”

Once students are accepted, parents gain a more comprehensive understanding of the school during open house. Several years ago the school switched from a traditional teacher-led open house format to student-led by new students at the school. Students spend their first week
and a half in orientation – learning about the school, the expectations and guiding principles. They work together to create a PowerPoint and invite their family and friends to hear their presentations. The result has been an increase in parent/guardian attendance. The open house is the first opportunity parents have to see the transformation that has begun with their son/daughter, dressed professionally and giving a public presentation. As one teacher stated, “It may not be the best presentation in the world because they’ve just been here a week and a half, and they may be shy, but they’re up there, and they are owning it, and they are dressed nicely and I think it hooks the parent in a little bit more than just us standing there.” Another teacher stated, “once the kids go through the orientation and perform the open house presentation, I think the parents are like, ‘Oh, wow, finally. I’m so relieved something is going to work here.’ Parents are very grateful.”

The open house also alleviates some parents’ misconceptions about the school. As one teacher stated, “A lot of parents . . . think their child is going to a dumping ground . . . When we told [one] mom that [her daughter] applied and got in, [her] dad was so against it and said [to the daughter], ‘What, you can’t make it in a regular school so you have to go where the stupid kids go?’ or something like that . . . So, he came to open house and he came up to us afterwards and said, ‘I just wanted to let you know that I think what you are doing is great.’”

The school leader described intentional outreach to parents as, “If a child needs additional support, of course we’re going to call, arrange a meeting, bring the parent on board and attempt to engage them as a partner. We have the same goals in mind, so let’s work together as a team the best we can.” All parents are given teachers’ cell phone numbers that they may call with questions or concerns (and to say ‘thank you’), and teachers outreach parents for support when a student is struggling (personally or academically), and to let them know when a student is doing
really well. Outreach to parents is done by all staff members, depending on the situation and who has the better rapport with a particular student. Oftentimes the school guidance counselor makes the contact.

The school also connects with parents three to four times annually through mailings and parents are invited to attend school events in the community including student art exhibits. These are open to the public and each student is strongly encouraged to invite at least one significant person in his/her life to provide support on that evening. According to one teacher, “I would say most parents do [attend], or a student has at least one support person. Some people bring an old teacher they invite, but it’s open—some people bring seven people, other people bring one.”

There is limited intentional outreach to actively involve parents in their students’ daily learning. This is due in part to the age of the students, the location of the school on a college campus, and the school is focused on developing students’ leadership skills which include taking responsibility for their own learning.

The superintendent reflected on the necessity of parent involvement at the school, stating, “What I observe, a lot, are parents . . . at their wit’s end . . . I think it’s positive when you can engage [parents] and their relationship is positive, but I don’t think it’s crucial. I don’t think it’s absolutely necessary in this case because of the nature of the program.”

According to the principal, “A lot of the students that go up to the [school], one of their major challenges is their parent. They have issues with their parents at home—either they didn’t consider education important and didn’t push them, or maybe they’re absent. Some of these
students actually live on their own or they live in all kinds of different alternatives. They live with an aunt or an uncle, who knows.”

One teacher further explained that some parents,

We don’t see until graduation. Some of them we never see. We have parents in jail sometimes. We have parents who are not involved in their kids’ lives, parents who kick their kids out . . . [Some parents are] really grateful. They love their kids to death, but they don’t know how to discipline, or they don’t know how to treat them with respect. They don’t know how to give them responsibilities so they can gain the confidence to accept bigger responsibilities.

This teacher further stated that when students attend the school, “sometimes kids end up having much better relationships with their parents as a result of learning how to talk to them and understanding the psychology behind parents because we do talk about that. [We’ll say], ‘You know, if parents aren’t getting along with you, here are some reasons why that might be.’ And then they start to realize, ‘I may have a part in this too.’”

As the superintendent reflected on the evaluation of the alternative school’s ties with parents, a distinction was made between parent involvement and connecting with parents. Parent involvement is traditionally measured by attendance at school activities. However, the superintendent believes many parents of students at the alternative school have had negative experiences with the traditional schools, resulting in a lack of trust. Considering this, the superintendent believes the alternative school has been able to engage the parents in ways that our [traditional] high schools could not . . . I think because of the relationship with their children, it’s made the parents more comfortable in dealing with the [alternative] school—not as intimidating maybe, not as traditional, cold, a little bit warmer. In that kind of school you do a lot of little things for kids that you can’t do in the [traditional] public school, and I think that goes a long way towards engaging parents. I think it shows parents that these people really care about their kids. That makes it a lot easier for parents to pick up the phone when the school calls . . . I think because of the hard work [the alternative school staff] put in with every single kid, it does create a sense of confidence in the parent that the teachers really care
about them. So, there’s actually a very strong parent connection. I can’t think of too many times [when] there has been one that hasn’t been positive. It’s pretty remarkable actually.

In order to provide a nontraditional education to students, Alternative School A relies on strong ties with the community for supplemental opportunities for learning and personal development as well as financial sustainability of the school. The school’s location on the college campus is viewed as a significant element to the school’s success. This partnership not only provides space, but develops students’ leadership skills and ownership of their learning by treating them more like college students than traditional high school students. According to one teacher, this partnership is more than high school students using a few rooms on the college campus. “They understand that this campus is theirs. The president of the college comes down and talks to them and reinforces that, so it’s very open . . . They are students of the [school district], but they’re very welcome up here at the college and you can’t distinguish the difference between them. That’s actually our goal too as a school . . . in terms of maturity.” The alternative school students have college ID’s. If they are interested in taking college courses on campus, they take the Abilities to Benefits Test to determine the appropriate level of course. They have access to the college gymnasium, game room, and learning centers. They volunteer for activities, and take part in events like a 5K on campus.

In addition to connections with the on-campus school community, students are actively involved in the greater community through mandatory work and community service components of the school. All students are required to work in the community part-time, at least fifteen hours each week. During the past ten years, over 120 local and regional businesses have partnered with the school to provide jobs for students. The work component helps students form additional positive connections in the community, and develop skills needed to find and maintain future
employment. The businesses and nonprofits that hire students understand that their role is more than just an employer. As one teacher stated, “nonprofits and community organizations understand the program and they want to be mentors. That’s really important because the kids are with them three or four hours a day.”

Students are also actively engaged in the community through service projects. In the first nine years the school was in existence, students contributed over 19,000 hours of service to the community. Their reputation as a community-oriented school has spread and now organizations contact them with requests for help.

These partnerships require ongoing care and attention and have helped overcome community misconceptions about the school. As one teacher explained, “I think there were a lot of critics or skeptics in the community at first . . . you know, ‘[You’re going to] put all those at-risk kids together in one place? ‘How are you going to do that?’ . . . But, the model works really well and once we got the first few years under our belt, and were able to show that whatever it is we are doing, it’s working for these kids, then we started to get a lot of support.”

The superintendent believes that currently the school has strong ties with the community:

A lot of the stuff I have to do as superintendent, whether it’s Chamber of Commerce events or Rotary events or whatever, you hear from these people saying, ‘I’m working with so and so. They’re at my business and they’re a great kid’ . . . [That] tells me, OK, that’s good, it’s working well . . . The community knows what the program is. They know it’s at [the college]. They know it’s very successful. We have a lot of parents that call and want their kids in there. Unfortunately, some of them can’t because they won’t do the work to get in there.

The school leader added that, “a lot of the students who come here (and their parents) know about the school because they know somebody else who’s been through the school, and
they saw great changes in them. ‘Wow, I think I’d like that’ . . . the word is getting out there too among parents that this is a place where your child can point themselves in the right direction.’

New students in the school oftentimes have misconceptions about the community as well. One teacher stated that, “A lot of students come in here with this whole [idea] . . . [The city] hates kids, and they’ve got this whole notion that the town is anti-teenager. And maybe it’s because of things they’ve done in the past, or things they’ve seen in the past.” The school helps them reconnect to the community in a positive way, and the school leader believes this is vital as students are

visible in the community doing important things and they suddenly realize that [the city] really is a supportive place . . . Through employment, community service, and community programs such as art projects, students are able to establish positive connections within the community. These create new possibilities for new relationships and opportunities and often change their perceptions of their community and their connection to it.

The principal sees the school’s community connections as one of the most significant things that separate it from the traditional school. He relates the importance of these connections, not just for the support provided to the program, but the difference he sees it make in students’ lives and their connections to the community in which most of them will continue to live:

The amount of community involvement that they have . . . it’s something that’s noticed by everybody . . . [The local company and corporate foundation] which is one of our biggest supporters . . . they’re always acknowledging the [alternative school] for their accomplishments and the amount of time spent in the community . . . It’s nice to be recognized that way, and the longer the kids are there, the more acknowledgment they get, the better they feel, they buy into it, and then they’re part not only of the school, but they’re part of the community. A lot of the students that are there had no ties to the community before they went up there. None. And they come out of there with a sense of pride in their community . . . That’s not a benefit to the [school], that’s a benefit for all of us and you can definitely see it . . . A lot of students that go there are at risk, at risk for a lot of things and with that sense of pride and community, a lot of times they choose to go
a different path... It’s awesome, and powerful, and something we couldn’t do at the [traditional] high school, or don’t do at the [traditional] high school.

Substantial financial support from a local corporate foundation has been vital for the sustainability of the school, and has relieved the ongoing anxiety or pressure of “Are we going to be funded next year?” This is significant, not just for the continued existence of the school, but for ongoing buy-in and commitment of those connected to the school. In addition to the large corporate foundation funding, a local family foundation pays for student wages (mostly at nonprofits) for the work component, and financially supports student art programs at community organizations.

The school leader reflected on his vision for the school and how he measures its success, stating,

[It] has to do with growth, and I don’t mean making the school larger. I just mean we learn every year or every day... To be willing to reflect on what’s happening and ask repeatedly, ‘Is this working the best that it can?’ And if not, ‘What can we do to fix it?’... To be aware... Are we meeting the needs of our students? Are we meeting the needs of the staff?, Are we meeting the needs of the college?, Are we meeting the needs of our employers in the community?, Are we meeting the needs of our funders?, Of our supporters?, Of the administration of [the traditional schools]? And it requires constant attention... and you need to let go of some things sometimes, make sure you focus on students first.

**Teachers’ Capacity & Commitment**

“While parents are their children’s first teachers, the school faculty holds the keys that unlock students’ intellectual development” (Sebring et. al. 2006, 12). According to Sebring et al. (2006), Teachers’ Capacity & Commitments, or Professional Capacity, includes teachers’ expertise in their content area, commitment to the school, ability to work well with others, belief in their responsibility toward change, and continuous improvement through professional development.
According to the school principal, School A has “four core teachers and a guidance counselor and they’re great people. They’re the right people. I guess that’s a big part of it too, you have to hire right. You have to have the right people, people that are definitely willing to look outside the box and try some different things. People that are patient and flexible.” The superintendent further described the teachers’ expertise by explaining that they are, “your best of the best . . . The reason this works [is] because of those [teachers] . . . not because of us [administrators].” He added that the teachers are “Very student-centered. We’re not having to send these people to seminars on how to deal with people or kids, classroom management strategies.” When hiring teachers for the school, the superintendent looked for teachers who had a “basic belief that the relationship was the most important piece of helping kids be successful . . . [and had the] ability to work in a team . . . the ability to work with people.”

The principal believes there are special skills or expertise that help teachers at the alternative school achieve success, “You have to be flexible. You have to be willing to try new things. You have to be willing to look at education in a different way knowing that it’s not just the instructional period that you have, that it’s also about building relationships, something that they’re all exceptional at doing.”

Teachers use knowledge of their content area to develop their own curriculum and a repertoire of teaching strategies to effectively guide students through the learning process. But, there is also an emphasis by staff and district administrators on the ability to relate well to others; to be able to develop positive relationships with students and to work with fellow staff in an ongoing, collective effort toward school improvement.
Teachers’ roles and responsibilities in School A extend beyond the classroom environment. The nontraditional structure of the school resembles a multi-faceted program including community service, a student-run business, and a work component. According to one teacher, one of the more challenging parts of the job is the extra duties including scheduling, maintaining student timesheets from work, record keeping, maintaining the school contact lists, and participation in community service and recreational/educational trips with students. “We do all those kind of things. We plan the graduations, we do all the publication for that. We run a maple syrup business . . . maintain the receipt book for that and scheduling for that, just as it comes up we divvy up the tasks and run the program because we don’t have support staff, so it’s really a team effort here to run the program.”

Engrained in the culture of this school is an understood, agreed-upon expectation that teachers take on extra responsibilities in addition to their teaching duties. These duties, or responsibilities, provide additional opportunities for teachers to strengthen their relationships with students and further guide them toward full development. This extra commitment and buy-in by all staff members is important to the overall success of the school, and as the principal stated, “If there was a teacher that was not totally a hundred percent into being there, we would find a different place for them to be.”

The teachers’ commitment to the school is by choice, and while each story evolved in a different way, the common thread is that they all believe they are where they belong, where they fit. All of the teachers applied to be a part of the school and the school leader believes

With only five staff members, each and every staff member is crucial. It’s very important. When we’re working together, like we are now, it’s just like a well-oiled machine . . . But, if there’s something that’s interfering at a deeper level, whether it’s teaching philosophy or inability to get along with co-workers or whatever it might be,
that’s very stressful. Buy-in by the staff is huge . . . [buy-in not just with the school philosophy, but] . . . Everything. It’s a lifestyle [and a commitment to] the whole process.

The school leader further reflected on his personal decision to leave his teaching position at the traditional high school and invest in the alternative school. “It was interesting . . . philosophically I was very happy at [the traditional high school] . . . But, at a certain point [I] couldn’t imagine not teaching here [at the alternative school] because so much of what I valued becoming a part of, the whole philosophy, could be transmitted to a school-wide approach rather than an isolated classroom.”

One of the other teachers believes, “[I] just fell into where I was supposed to be [at the school].” This teacher further explained,

I’m so committed to this school because, just like the students say, it’s like my second family. I really consider each one of these students [like] a little brother or sister . . . I’m committed to this school as a whole because I’m always trying to think of . . . how our procedures can go better, and how we can make it easier for the kids to do this. The schedule, how we can make it so that we get the most of what we’ve got here in our time allotment. Those are ways I’m committed . . . I can tell I’m committed because I’m always talking to people about it, bragging about certain things.

Another teacher stated,

I don’t know what really brought all of us here. For me, I had one teacher in high school that I could go to and talk to. The rest of them didn’t even seem to know my name or didn’t seem to care whether I did well or not. But, if there was one teacher that showed me respect, and showed me compassion, and asked me questions about my personal life. I’m interested in these kids, and their lives, and what they are going through, and what struggles they have to face. I want to help them in that respect as well as in their learning. So, I think compassion is a big part of it [and] . . . a nonjudgmental attitude that we’re all here for the same reason, and we’re all equally important.

Another teacher’s personal connection with the school was described as, “I just thought, ‘This is true learning.’ I know the students here are doing something special . . . I didn’t get into teaching to make a million dollars. I got into teaching because it was really just an inner passion
I love teaching . . . It’s just the ability to sit down and to work with an individual and see what they can do. There’s unlimited potential there. I still believe that anybody can learn as long as they are willing to put forth the effort.”

This teacher further believes the school is important because too many kids are lost; “so many people are stuck, and it’s not [from lack of] ability. They just didn’t have that one key interaction, so they folded. We’re here to prevent that.”

The principal keeps the alternative school staff informed of changes in district or state policies and opportunities for professional development, which are difficult for the alternative school staff to attend because of their different schedules. Professional development times at the traditional schools are held directly after school when the alternative school is having instruction time each day. The principal explained that

A lot of times they’re given that opportunity [to participate in professional development] and they choose to be with students, and we give them the flexibility to do that. A lot of times there’s something that they’ve got planned that really can’t be moved or shouldn’t be moved. A lot of times I find that they go seek out things on their own that they feel they are weak in . . . something they think is worthwhile to what they’re doing because everything we do in the district doesn’t necessarily apply [to them]. But I do feel sometimes they do know less about some things like the Common Core learning standards or the evaluation process that we just changed this past year, or any number of things—because of their location for one and their schedule which is difficult to work around . . . When they are caught up with all these different things . . . they’ll do the best they can to incorporate [them], . . . but they’re not going to let it change the core of what they do . . . They do what they can.

The staff at the school most often relies on each other for individual and school-wide improvement. As the school leader explained, one thing that is special about the alternative school is “having a staff that’s philosophically on the same page, [and] the time to meet . . . If we need ten minutes to sit down and discuss something we can pull it together and do that.”
Another teacher explained, “We’re always talking to each other, the teachers, we’re always giving our input. Every single week we go down our list [of students] and have discussions about every single kid.” Another teacher added that these collective staff meetings occur, “At least once a week. We sit down . . . talk about all of our students, what’s going on with each one of them and that’s a good time to catch up on things. We try to plan out the schedule for the week. Occasionally we’ll do a book study or [something] curriculum [related].”

The school leader believes it is important that teachers take time to share information and insights about individual students:

So much can be gained from that. I’ll have a certain perspective on a new student we don’t know very well and I only see them in my class or at orientation, and so, I will make a statement or a comment, and then another teacher may have something very similar which . . . oh, this is what’s in common, or another [teacher] will say, ‘I’ve had a very different experience. Here’s what it’s been here,’ and that communication really helps us. That team approach really helps us get a clearer, more focused picture of each student.

The meetings tend to focus on each student’s development in meeting individual goals and application of the guiding principles. One teacher explained, “We don’t talk a lot about teaching. Everybody I think has their own method and does their own thing in the classroom, though I’m sure it’s pretty similar.” Other teachers stated that they reach out to resources in the district for curriculum development expertise, or rely on other staff at the alternative school to help them improve their instructional strategies.

One teacher described gaining expertise from other staff members, stating, “I have asked everybody [for help], even [the guidance counselor]. Sometimes there’s a behavioral piece there. It could be how to instruct a student who is going through a certain issue . . . [The science teacher] and I are sometimes sitting next to each other [at] the computer, I’ll look up and say, ‘Do you have any idea how I can do this better?’” This teacher further described developing
instructional techniques that focus on guiding students instead of leading them; asking students guiding questions that help them reflect on the answers and lead themselves. These techniques were developed by “seeing the type of teachers that we have here and working with some past ones like [the former school leader], [a] great mentor. I can still hear the type of questions that they’ve asked students and I’ve learned to exercise them more in the past couple of years.”

The staff’s ability to work together as a team is attributed partly to their commitment to the school’s guiding principles. As one teacher explained, “We try to follow them. [We] try to show them, demonstrate them for the students. [Principles] of integrity, that willingness to share the responsibility, [and show] mutual respect at all times.” And, as another teacher stated, “we genuinely like each other . . . We are very understanding with one another, and if someone is having trouble with something, we are always there to figure out how we can help. We work together. A lot of times we’ll overlap curriculum . . . [we do] book studies together, focusing on books that are directed toward situations like ours.” The principal added, the teachers are “comfortable with each other. I’ve never heard of any issues between them, and if there were, they would work them out . . . I’m sure that there are things that come up that they need to work through, but they keep it in house and honestly I’m not part of that house, but I’m OK with that.”

According to one teacher, one of the most important things for a cohesive staff is to be flexible. The extent of this flexibility and teamwork is evidenced by teachers’ willingness to modify the day’s schedule depending on the needs of a certain teacher or class. For example, if the science teacher needs additional time with students to prepare for Regents exams, or to complete the required labs for the trimester, that becomes the center of the school schedule and other classes fill in around the needs of that teacher and group of students. This teacher believes, “If we [did] not have flexibility as a staff, we would sink.”
Overall, the school leader believes, “Every person who works here cares about this school. They get it. They get the philosophy. They understand what works best for our students. They understand it’s not always linear. They understand that we have to be flexible, that we need to trust each other and support each other . . . The staff is just great because we recognize each other’s strengths and weaknesses and we’ve been able to fit that together really well.”

Student-Centered Learning Climate

“A fundamental requirement of schools is to create a safe, welcoming, stimulating, and nurturing environment focused on learning for all children” (Sebring et al. 2006, 13). This Essential Element includes a safe and orderly school environment, with high academic standards and caring support.

According to the superintendent, “Not enough people in public education recognize the power of the relationship with kids today . . . They don’t necessarily want to be your friend, but they want to be close to you and they need to know that you care about them . . . Sometimes all it takes is that one adult relationship that can mean the difference between a kid making it and not making it.” From its inception, School A was designed to be student-centered. Students choose to attend the school and according to the principal, the small school size allows them to receive the individualized attention they need to be successful. Whether students have struggled with social anxiety about being in a large traditional school or lack support from home and are looking for a family atmosphere, “that’s what the [school] has. They never go over forty students because they want to be able to give that individual instruction . . . Their classes range anywhere from two or three if that’s what they need to do, to ten . . . and that really gives them an ability to reach out unlike anything we can do in the [traditional] high school.”
The school leader further stated that he believes the most important ingredients for developing a student-centered learning climate include recognition of students as individuals. It’s being a part of a larger learning community that values education. It’s not just me fighting this battle here over in this corner and you fight yours over there. There’s a sense within the classrooms that although we came for different reasons, we’re all here now, so let’s help each other. You get grades out of the way. There’s no reason to compete. You want to help each other. That’s great. That’s better. That’s not cheating. That’s the world. I think focusing on individuals, helping them feel like they’re part of the learning community, high standards, not accepting ‘just get by’ anymore, focusing on the whole student.

The school leader reflected on the importance of developing relationships and helping students transition from adolescence to adulthood.

You get to know them. Treat every student like an individual. Think about where they are and encourage them, and along with them find what they are capable of, passionate about, and where they need to grow—sometimes help them with that reflection. Often, it’s just being consistently supportive while holding high standards. It’s not an enabling sort of thing that gets them to make that move [to adulthood]... They have to accept responsibility at some point.

He also emphasized the importance of getting to know each student individually, stating,

We’ve got some incredibly mature and adult-like sixteen year olds, and we’ve got some twenty year olds who still have a little ways to go. But it’s a matter of providing consistent expectations, and standards, and level of care and support that we guide them through that process... Some of them need more guidance and other ones we realize we just need to get out of their way and let them do what they do because we’ve given them the platform to at least have a fresh start to do whatever they need to do to move on with their life.

In addition to intentionally developing positive relationships with individual students, staff maintains a student-centered learning climate by modeling and reinforcing agreed-upon expectations for behavior, and maintaining a small atmosphere where teachers have ample opportunities for discussions with students on choices they have made, leading to further development of the whole student. Agreed-upon expectations for student behavior in this school community include three non-negotiables—no drugs or alcohol at school or work, no violence
(verbal or physical), and no plagiarism. The third one was added by students because they do not use textbooks and need to learn to give appropriate credit. Because of these non-negotiables, the school leader believes “every student should be able to come here and feel safe every day. So, regardless of what’s going on outside, which we don’t have control over, leave your drama at the door if you can, come in here and engage in the learning, and know that you’re in a community of supportive people here.” The foundational guiding principles of the school are engrained in the daily culture, emphasized and encouraged by teachers and students alike. As the school leader stated, “it’s beyond just the teachers . . . it’s the students too who are saying, ‘I recognize how important it is to feel safe here and to feel supported’ . . . to make sure everyone here is afforded that respect.”

The principal believes students “feel they’re extremely safe and cared for . . . The safety thing is interesting because honestly it is much more unstructured, but I know they feel more safe.” He attributes the safe environment in part to the relationships students have with each other and with their teachers, and stated, “The students are all very close which is great. Some of them are close to the staff, and they always pick out one or two to be exceptionally close to.”

Creating and maintaining an environment where students feel safe and supported is sometimes a challenge as new students enter the school three times a year. Some new students experience a learning curve in how to treat others with respect. As one teacher described,

Some of them don’t have much of a filter when they come and strange things come out of their mouths, sometimes hurtful things . . . Any kind of threat or anything that makes a student feel uncomfortable or not safe, or hurt in any way, if we hear it, we jump on it right away. I think they understand within a couple of days . . . They have to think before they speak and that is such a skill, tact. There’s a way you can say something that’s not hurtful.
The teachers believe new students quickly become accustomed to the expectations of their role in creating a safe school environment, partly due to veteran students portraying leadership by exhibiting and promoting positive behaviors. According to one teacher, if there is a student who is not exemplifying the guiding principles,

it’s [oftentimes] one of the other students who will say, ‘Hey, be respectful . . . [Teachers will] give the veteran students that role of leader. We say, ‘These kids are coming. They’re new kids. You’ve got to show them the ropes.’ We do stress leadership, and we award them for their leadership a lot. I think they take that pretty seriously and they take the school seriously. We’re family so they want to make sure everyone is paying attention to those guiding principles the best we can, and still having fun.

A student leadership mindset is engrained in students over time with consistent daily reinforcement and modeling by staff and veteran students. As the school leader stated there is an emphasis on being thoughtful about choices in actions and words, “Is what I’m about to say going to bring us closer together or push us further apart?” This is a new way of thinking for many new students who attend the school. The school leader believes that

for a lot of the students, I think they’ve been focused so long on survival and getting through the day, and school has never really been a priority for one thing, and also they’ve had to worry about themselves so much that it’s all about me, me, me. And then after they’re here for a while, it’s interesting, you see that shift where they realize, ‘It’s us. It’s not me. I can see out beyond myself and that other people have feelings and needs too, and I can fit that into my world view.’ . . . Part of that is just a transition from adolescence to adult, but we’re here at the right time and capitalize on it.

Students are expected to exhibit these positive behaviors on and off the campus. As the school leader explained,

Perceptions of the school and the students within the community are important. So, that’s one of the things we try to help them think about is that when you leave school, or when you are on this campus, you represent us. If you like what we have here, then make sure that you realize that anytime you do anything on this campus or off, it’s going to reflect back on all of us. So, they demonstrate that by really trying to address those things. If their name is in a police report, they come to school, stand before the students and say, ‘I’m really sorry. This is what I’ve learned from this and here’s what I want to do differently next time.’

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The superintendent believes the staff’s approach to student behavior contributes to the student-centered learning climate:

Do [students] get write-ups from the assistant principal if they’re late? No. [The school leader] or [guidance counselor], or one of the teachers will pull them aside and say, ‘You know you’ve been late two days in a row. What’s the deal?’ There isn’t an after school detention. There’s a real . . . ‘If this continues, we may have to talk about you not continuing . . . in this program.’ . . . And because of the power of the relationship, I think that the kids are in a position [where] they don’t want to disappoint the adults . . . I think by the staff showing they believe in these kids and we’re going to treat you like adults, young adults, and if you say you’re going to [do something] . . . I trust that’s what you’re really doing . . . I think that really resonates with kids.

In addition to creating a safe environment, the school staff focuses on getting to know students’ academic strengths and weaknesses, and works with them individually to realize their full intellectual ability. An emphasis on achieving one’s individual potential is evidenced in the school’s grading method which measures student learning by whether they are working to their fullest potential. The school leader described the grading method as

a competency-based classroom which is a William Glasser Choice Quality School model where instead of grades we work for quality . . . A student on their transcript will either receive a ‘P’ or an ‘H.’ ‘P’ is equivalent to an 85% or better, it’s mastery . . . It might look different from one student to another. There’s no such thing as failure. There’s no such thing as, ‘I’m not doing it.’ Because you might not do it now, but you’ll do it eventually because it’s been deemed important as something you need to do to meet the requirements to get the credit for the class, which you need to get to graduate. So, your resistance is futile.

And, if it isn’t the best a student can do, they go back and the school leader says they, “Fix it, make it right. We get very little pushback on that because they understand. They’d much rather do it five times and have it be awesome than they would to have it handed back once and say, ‘That’s a sixty-five. What does that mean? I still don’t know thirty-five percent of the stuff.’” This is new to students attending the school who are familiar with the traditional grading systems. As one teacher explained,
When students first come in they’re not used to getting things back and having to fix them, or revise them, or add to them to make it better. They very quickly get used to that fact and having conversations with students about their thinking, and their process, and how you could make this even better, and make your argument even stronger, whatever the project is. I think that whole idea that you are not done with a project until it is done very well . . . And the fact that you’re expected to participate in class, to discuss, to have an opinion, and it’s OK because no one is going to make fun of you here for it. No one is going to pick on you if you say the wrong word or say something that someone might find ridiculous because that’s the level of respect that we have in our classrooms.

Students’ learning is measured by individual presentations of learning at the end of each trimester, and a final, cumulative presentation before graduation. Presentations of learning are a way for individual students to reflect on what they have learned and share their knowledge with a panel comprised of other students, teachers, administrators, and community members. The school leader added that, “Students are expected to reflect deeply upon their learning. To evaluate how new information integrates with their changing world view.”

As a result of this process, the school leader believes students “get better at reflecting, self-evaluation. They get better at expressing what they know. They get better at public speaking and engaging.”

The superintendent further stated,

because they are actually demonstrating the learning in a variety of ways, I actually think it’s potentially more rigorous in certain areas than what we have in either [traditional] high school . . . We have a lot of our students who you’ll put a test in front of them, or they’ll write a paper and turn it in and get feedback . . . These poor kids [at the alternative school] have to stand up and talk about it in front of a group of people . . . you’ve got this kid who . . . didn’t have a lot of confidence to begin with, comes from a difficult family in some cases, and they have to stand up and demonstrate what they’ve learned and how they’ve learned it. It’s powerful.

Another significant aspect of the school’s focus on whole-student development includes helping students write resumes, providing instruction on how to make a professional presentation, and coaching them to find and maintain employment. The school leader believes
this is important for students to realize that steady employment brings “financial support, which gives you independence, which for a lot of them, if they’re in situations where they’re feeling pretty helpless because of a dysfunctional family environment, that’s the beginning of their sense of, ‘I don’t have to stay this way. I can start becoming independent so that I can make my own decisions and then start my own family some day and try not to repeat some of those mistakes.”

With regard to academic support, the school does not provide special education services. If a student is classified with a learning disability in the traditional school system, they need to be declassified before they enroll in the alternative school. The school does make testing modifications as needed, mostly when students need a smaller class environment or one-on-one academic support, and as one teacher explained, “there’s a lot of individual explanations, restating, rewording until they understand.”

The guidance counselor provides additional academic support by reviewing each student’s transcripts with them, similar to a college student. This is part of ongoing discussions with students about their future plans and helping them develop the decision-making skills to achieve those plans. The guidance counselor also meets with teachers and students to identify student strengths, and create a plan to help them achieve their individual best. One teacher described a recent scenario by stating, “[A student] has a strength in math . . . He tested into pre-calculus when he was here and we were able to determine that he is the type of student that should be taking a college class . . . We sat down and talked about the different options. [The student, guidance counselor, and I] went over on campus, talked to . . . the current head of the department and found the best option.”
In addition to helping students register for college courses and job skills training, the guidance counselor provides personal counseling to individual students struggling with non-academic issues. As one teacher explained, “Without a guidance counselor up here, I think we would lose important connections with our students. He keeps us [teachers] informed of what’s important . . . He doesn’t tell us totally and that’s OK. I’d rather have a student tell somebody who, if it comes down to it, as a mandated reporter, can take those uncomfortable extra steps.”

As teachers develop positive relationships with students, they too provide care as they become aware of a need. As the school leader stated, “We’re small. If you’re having an issue, somebody is going to notice and we’re going to take the time to talk to you about it. We will meet with families. We will make other community support available, make connections when there are other agencies in the community that can help. We will connect them.” Another teacher stated, “Each student has one or two teachers that they’ll latch on to if they’re going through a rough spot or need help with something or even need to ask, and say, ‘Listen, I don’t have dress clothes’ . . . [for an interview or community event] and one of us will take him to the [Salvation Army].” Another teacher explained that when a student is going through a particularly difficult time, teachers and the guidance counselor, “spend a lot of time thinking and then talking through a plan with a student to at least get them to the next day. Sometimes the plan could be [that we provide the] support . . . We’ve never had issues with helping them find materials that they may need right then if that is an issue. I’m thinking like clothes, food, we have that type of stuff here . . . It’s a small amount to us and can go a long way to them.”

The school leader further stated that at times it would be nice to have a place for students to live. “Sometimes home gets in the way so much that it gets in the way of their ability to come to school or have a job, and if they have a safe place to live at least temporarily, that would
help.” Currently, if a student is in that type of situation, he stated, “It depends on the individual. We try to figure things out, or we call people we know who have opened a room before.”

The school leader personally measures the success of the school by how well it is able to be aware of and be flexible enough to meet the needs of individual students. He believes that if students are asked what makes the school successful, the same student would answer differently depending on his/her current need. To the school leader, that is the biggest measure of success, “Because it’s multi-faceted, it might be because it’s a place where a student feels challenged academically. It might be a place where they were given a chance to start over again and decided to really take advantage of that. It might be because they always have somebody to talk to and get support from if they need it. It could be the job. It’s all of those things.”

He further measures the effectiveness of support services provided to students by the number of students who stay involved in the conversation . . . If you’re having a problem in this class and you demonstrate that you’re learning things and you eventually get credit or pass the Regents exam . . . there’s proof that we’ve been successful. If you don’t have a job and then you do, you add that to your resume, and you get a good reference. If you don’t have a place to stay this weekend and we figure something out for you, then it worked . . . Keeping them engaged. If it doesn’t work it means that they end up somewhere and I don’t know, but if it does work, then we’re still here having a conversation working on the whole person moving toward graduation.

When asked to identify important leadership and organizational characteristics that make the school effective, one teacher stated,

I think the atmosphere is prime importance, that accepting, even loving atmosphere where the kids know it is a safe place where they can have fun and meet their goals at the same time . . . The kids who have been either damaged or hurt in some way or just don’t care about school anymore because ‘what is it doing for them’ type thing, and they don’t have the confidence, and they don’t have the desire to learn. So if we can bring that back. Bring back that desire. Bring back that enthusiasm for their futures, which I think a lot of them don’t even see themselves as doing anything important in their lives, and then suddenly they’re like, ‘oh, wow! Maybe I could do that.’” And to open up some doors and possibilities. And open up their eyes to all the things that they could possibly
do if they set their mind to it . . . Just that confidence, that ‘I can do it’ is really important to show them.

**Instructional Guidance**

“A safe, nurturing climate sets the stage for learning, but instruction is the single most direct factor that affects student learning” (Sebring et al. 2006, 14). According to Sebring et al. (2006), the element of *Instructional Guidance*, or *Ambitious Instruction*, includes curriculum alignment and intellectual challenge.

The school leader of Alternative School A believes the elements of effective instructional guidance at the school include, “highly dedicated teachers focused on individual students and individual learning styles, helping students identify their strengths and weaknesses within a curriculum. But, overall, helping them to have more ownership of their learning, to feel more connected to what they’re learning, to feel that what they’re learning is valuable and relevant.”

According to the superintendent, Alternative School A teachers work within the parameters of the district’s curriculum guidelines. “They’re doing a lot of inquiry-based instruction, heavy discussion,” but they are given flexibility. He explained this flexibility by stating, “We’ve been very firm with our [traditional] teachers the last six years or so, that this is the curriculum, this is how you’re going to teach it. Not so much with [the alternative school] and the more we push, the more resistant they get. So, that’s what makes [the director of secondary education] so great in her role because she’s been able to find a way to make it work for them.”

With regard to curriculum development and instruction, one teacher stated, “It’s very flexible and it’s creative and that feels good to me. I can do different things next year than I do
this year. I can come up with a unit that the kids are really interested in and spend a lot of time and then I might not do it again for three or four years.”

The superintendent believes that the teachers “understand what good instruction is . . . [and] they use different strategies with different kids . . . They can be teaching a math lesson, and one student has a severe reading comprehension issue, and the other just doesn’t want to do the work. You’ve got to deal with those kinds of kids differently. Because the numbers are smaller, they can do that.” Teachers are also able to adapt their curriculum based on the needs of current students. According to the principal, they have flexibility to pick and choose things from the district’s curriculum matrix, and “they change from semester to semester. They can teach a course in the fall, and the course in the spring could look completely different depending on the students’ ability level . . . They’re great at changing instruction for the needs of the students they have.”

Teachers focus on current events, students’ individual needs, and group dynamics when planning their curriculum and instructional techniques. According to one teacher,

Whenever we’re thinking of recreating or restructuring a class, we’re thinking of the students that we have, and we’re thinking of their strengths, how they interact in the class. Sometimes there are cautionary things. Sometimes there are things like these two may have potential to dominate the whole thing, so how do we get everybody involved? So, it’s a trick . . . especially not having any textbooks or anything like that. You’ve got to know your curriculum really well, how to strengthen it, how to evaluate yourself as well as ask for help.

As another teacher stated, some groups need more traditional style instruction and others need less structure, primarily guidance. Because of the small class sizes, “I get to know [the students] so well . . . I can have a group of two people, they’re half way through something and I can work verbally with the people who need to have a talk-through. The guidance is very individualized.”
This teacher follows district requirements for certain projects, but, “for [other classes], I create a curriculum based on that class . . . and, of course, it aligns with both the Common Core and the testing.” When asked how curriculum is developed for a wide range of student interests and abilities, this teacher stated, “I tend to get books that I know that 90% of the students enjoy and that’s been a trial and error type of thing . . . I don’t have to do the same books that they’re doing at [the traditional high schools] or the same literature . . . Bottom line, tailoring what we read to the group so that it’s not too hard for anybody, but not too juvenile for the other.”

In addition to individualized curriculum and instruction, students have choice in what they learn. The principal, who does the teacher evaluations, was asked to reflect on what he believes are the elements of effective instructional guidance at the school. He stated that he’s not sure that differs between the traditional and alternative school, but teachers at the alternative school are really good at getting their students engaged, in part because they have relationships with the kids, so they know what buttons to push. For example, if they’re in an English class, they’re going to get a lot of choice in what they write, and they’re going to be flexible in that and that’s across the board that they often will give what we would consider alternative assignments or give them a ton of choice. And I think that should happen in a regular classroom, but because of the numbers or whatever, maybe they’re excuses, but it doesn’t happen . . . There’s a lot of flexibility and the teachers will incorporate things the kids are interested in.

As one teacher stated, “there are certain topics that I really want them to understand, but they have a lot of choice.” This teacher further explained, “I try to get them to do things they are interested in rather than looking at a list of . . . projects and picking one that’s prescribed and canned . . . [I’ll ask], ‘What are you interested in?’ and ‘What questions can we ask about that thing?’”
This teacher also allows students to choose their own books according to their individual interests. “It’s chaotic, but I enjoy . . . going around from one person to another talking about what they’re doing, and everyone is doing something different. And sometimes it feels kind of crazy if it’s a big class. But, they’re so excited about sharing with each other what they’re learning because they’re not learning the same thing . . . They can learn a multitude of things from each other. I learn a lot too.”

Teachers also cater their instructional strategies based on whether they are teaching a Regents class. Regents classes tend to be more structured, including the use of lecture and making sure students know the material that will be on the exam. One teacher explained, “It’s nice to have that freedom [with curriculum and instruction] . . . I feel like there’s integrity in my program. I feel that I’m helping students . . . [learn] things that are important to their future . . . but I do keep on top of what’s going on in the district, especially for Regents classes.”

The school leader believes that, “Because of the individualized instruction and the development of skills, as well as the students’ ability to work at their own pace, the school’s Regents passing rate exceeds that of the rest of the district.” He added, “We just have great teachers,” and explained that ultimately you have to know the curriculum and you have to know what you want the outcomes to be, but how you get there . . . It lends itself to helping you think about how we can connect this to what’s relevant and what’s real, and as teachers, we’re pulling from a variety of resources. We’re expecting the students to be pulling from a variety of resources. And, because it’s small enough, we can go look at each student’s progress, sit down next to them, know where they stand in that process, and know how to help them make sure they’re keeping their standards high, and when they submit something, it’s their best at this time that they can do, and we both agree.
One teacher explained that,

I know what I want my students to be able to do. I want them to be able to think like scientists, and to ask the right questions, and know how to do an experiment or research to find out the answers. I want them to be curious and have some integrity to their endeavors. We use a lot of discussion questioning, so I can try to understand their thinking . . . try to tailor things to what I see are their learning styles and strengths, try to see which areas I can help them the most that will enhance other areas, try to be pretty analytical about how they learn.

Another teacher described challenging students to achieve their best, stating,

I have rubrics for everything that the students see, and most of my assignments are . . . writing assignments like essays, and a lot of times they align to the Regents exam just to help them practice. And sometimes they do hands-on projects and presentations, so I’m very good about giving them the assignment, the expectations, a checklist of things to [do] . . . With essays, I get it back, I edit it, they get it back, they revise it, I get it back, I edit it again, they revise it . . . It’s not just me crossing out words and spelling it correctly for them. It’s [me saying], ‘This word is spelled incorrectly, figure it out . . . This sentence, there’s something wrong, so it’s a fragment, change it, fix it.’ Any paper that I put in their portfolio is usually [in my mind] a ninety or above, but always has to be an eighty-five or above.

The school principal conducts teacher evaluations twice a year, once announced, once unannounced—the same for all teachers in the district. The role of the principal is to ensure the curriculum and instruction is in alignment with state and district guidelines.

With regard to instructional strategies, the principal believes,

They’re not afraid to take chances and try different things, in part because they’ve been given that freedom over time and they’d probably be the first ones to admit it doesn’t always work out, but that’s OK too. They have an ability to kind of laugh at themselves a little bit, and I think they pass that on to their students, and I think that’s important. They don’t take failure or setback as a problem, they just find a different way to do it, and I think that’s awesome. That’s something you don’t always see in the high schools. Sometimes people are so afraid of failure, they don’t want to try something new.

The principal stated that the teachers also have great flexibility with curriculum,

but they do a great job of hitting what they need to hit, obviously with how well students do on state assessments . . . I hate to have that be a measure because they don’t even have grades, so all of a sudden to have those high stakes tests [doesn’t] really fit into what they
do. But, it’s important in our community to show their standards are high and they have results . . . It’s not just these kids come up for three hours a day because they don’t want to go to school. It’s not like that at all. So, I think it’s important for perception that people see how successful they are with these assessments, unfortunately.

Even though the school does not put an emphasis on grades or scores on exams, the school leader believes that the Regents exams provide evidence that students are, “learning the skills necessary to pass those exams . . . the ability to read and understand, and to write and express, and to think independently, and to come up with your own conclusions on how to think, and think things through.”

When conducting teacher observations, the principal stated that his outcomes for teaching and learning are the same for both the alternative and traditional schools—student engagement, and interaction between students and teachers. He believes

[The alternative school teachers are] really good at that. It’s obvious that the students are comfortable, and they feel like they can speak up . . . I’ve seen those students in other environments, and that’s one thing that [those teachers] haven’t seen. They know these kids backwards and forwards, but they didn’t see them in the [traditional] high school. I saw these students sit at the table by themselves at lunch and not interact with people. I’ve seen them in a classroom where they’ll sit in the back and totally zone out and not pay attention to the lesson. Then, you go up there [to the alternative school] and you see the interaction between a teacher and student. A student that formerly had totally checked out on the whole process, and now they’re totally engaged is powerful.

As follow-up, the principal was asked what he believes are the key elements that help a student transform from disengaged to engaged. He replied, “Well, part of it is . . . and this is going to sound strange, but I think part of it is the increased expectations. I . . . think they like the smaller classroom environment, and I also think they like the idea they’re given a clean slate, they’re treated as adults for the most part, I won’t say equals, but pretty close . . . They do see it more as we’re in this together, this is a team approach, we’re all here trying to get this same goal. I think that’s the major difference.”
When asked how he ensures academic rigor, he stated, “That’s a great question. Minus the product we’re shown and the few times I am able to go up [to the school], and the observations . . . I guess in a situation where you’re not there very often, you have to look at outcomes and you have to look at how the students are doing—not only in the classroom, but also in the community.”

The principal believes that sometimes people “assume [the school’s] standards aren’t that high, when in reality they’re much higher [than a traditional school] in a lot of ways. Sure they get to call their teachers by their first names, but they have to [be] there every day and have to put in time, and have to be respectful of each other. It’s a different environment all together.”

The superintendent described measuring the effectiveness of the teachers’ curriculum development by stating,

Their results speak for themselves . . . You see these kids at graduation who those of us may have chased all over [town], and they’re smoking pot in the bathroom, or . . . they wouldn’t get out of bed, and then you see them at graduation . . . they’re different people and they’re able to speak very eloquently about their challenges, how they got through them, and what the rest of their life is going to be like. It’s kind of a shocking thing that creates a lot of trust between us and leadership in the district and the staff because it’s authentic assessment right there.

School A Summary

Alternative School A was established to “reconnect disconnected students” who are considered at-risk, but not “lost.” Disconnected students are those who have been unsuccessful in the traditional school environment by either dropping out or are in danger of dropping out. Students enroll in School A by choice, and are accepted to the school based on “readiness and fit.”
The leadership structure of School A is site-based and day-to-day responsibilities are shared between the school leader, teachers, and guidance counselor. Involved in the school since its inception, the school leader provides vision while keeping it grounded in its founding principles. District leadership (superintendent, director of secondary education, principal) provide administrative support, exercise limited oversight, and give flexibility to the staff, based on a shared commitment to the school’s philosophy of education and trust that has been developed from working together over time with positive results.

All staff members at the school are there by choice, selected because of their ability to relate well to students and their connection to the school’s philosophy and culture. Staff members are committed to the school and believe they are where they “fit.” Because of this commitment, there is an agreed-upon culture wherein teachers perform extra duties outside their classrooms and work together as a cohesive group toward continuous improvements of the school.

From the beginning, School A was structured to focus on individual students. The guiding principles provide a foundation for staff and students to create a safe learning community (academically, physically and emotionally) with an emphasis on student ownership for their learning and their actions. Teachers work with individual students to ensure they are reaching their full academic ability, and meet collectively every week to discuss each student’s progress and share ideas for improvements. In addition to meeting students’ academic needs, School A staff focuses on whole student development by providing vocational and social supports.
With an emphasis on identifying and meeting the individual needs of students, teachers are given flexibility to design and develop their own curriculum, based on their current student population, and within the parameters of district and state guidelines. According to the school leader, “It’s constructivist based. An attempt is made with all learning to establish connections through relevance, interest, or application or usefulness.” Teachers work with students on an individual basis, providing feedback and challenging them to achieve their individual best, ensuring students reach a level of mastery before an assignment is considered complete.

School A contributes to the community through service projects and relies heavily on the community for both financial and programmatic resources. These connections have been necessary for the school’s sustainability and its ability to achieve an expanded view of education to develop students’ vocational skills. While there are strong ties with the community, regular parent involvement is limited. This is due in part to the school’s location on a college campus, its goal to teach students to take ownership of their own learning, and the fact that many students’ family dynamics are complicated. The school makes a positive connection with parents during enrollment, evidenced by parents’ willingness to let their child attend, and these relationships are oftentimes strengthened as parents see positive changes occur.
Chapter 5: Alternative School B

Description of School B Community & District

School District B is located in a small city in New York State. With just over 70% of its population white, it is less diverse than the general population of New York State which is 66% white. A little over 90% of the city’s population over the age of 25 graduated from high school, higher than 85% state-wide; 65% has earned at least a bachelor’s degree, almost double the 33% state-wide. The median household income is slightly less than $30,000, well below the rest of the state at $57,683. Over forty-five percent of the population lives below the poverty level, more than three times higher than the rest of the state at 15% (U.S. Census Bureau).

According to the New York State Education Department (NYSED) the district is designated as Average Need/Resource Capacity meaning the ratio of student needs to local resources falls between the 20th and 70th percentiles on the index in comparison with other schools in the state. Slightly over 35% of students are eligible for free or reduced price lunch, and the total per pupil annual expenditure for District B is a little under $20,000, higher than the average for similar districts in the state at $18,876.

History & Description of School B

Alternative School B was established by the district’s Board of Education in the mid-1970s. At its inception, sixty-five students were enrolled in grades seven through twelve, with four full-time and five part-time staff. The school initially occupied space that previously housed the district’s central administration offices. Upon successful completion of a three year trial period, and with a growing enrollment, the school moved to a wing of the local traditional high school.
As the school continued to grow, it was moved to a separate building in the district and later joined the Coalition of Essential Schools, a national secondary school reform movement. As an alternative to traditional grades, student learning at School B is assessed by portfolios and Graduation by Exhibition guidelines. Currently, high school students at School B are exempt from all Regents exams except English. According to the principal, “that one we objected to less because it wasn’t driving our curriculum. We’re teaching research and writing” regardless of the exam. He further explained that his objection to testing “is not about whether or not it’s a good test. It’s about the high stakes nature of it and the dismissing of all the other learning that goes on . . . I’m not anti-test, I’m anti being myopic and absolute. I think kids deserve to be viewed as holistically as possible . . . I know there are kids who could pass four or five Regents exams that aren’t ready to graduate, and I know there are kids who couldn’t pass one that are ready to change the world.”

The philosophy, mission, and goals of the school are its foundational tenets, embedded in its daily culture. According to the principal,

You will see our belief statements proudly displayed in our gym. We refer to those. We meet regularly and intentionally as a whole school around governance, but also around reminding [ourselves] why we are here. And we’ve had students who say, ‘I propose we take that belief statement down. We’re not doing that anymore, and either we start doing it or stop lying to ourselves thinking that we do.’ We really try to be mission-driven in our decision-making, and values, and belief-driven in our hiring, in our curriculum development, in our approach to student behavior, in our approach to the materials that we bring into the building, food and otherwise, to the strong desire not to be school-based, be community-based. All those things I think really drive who we are. Do we forget sometimes? Do we get complacent? Yes. And it takes sometimes a teacher, sometimes a sixth grader to say, ‘Oh, yeah, what that eleven year old just said reminds me that we got off course here.’ And we all share that responsibility.
Due to increased growth in student enrollment and needed repairs, the school recently underwent significant renovations to upgrade and expand its facilities, including a full-size gymnasium, library, science labs, performing arts theater, and a cafeteria with a kitchen.

School B starts each day at 9:05 a.m., ends at 3:25 p.m., and operates on a similar annual school calendar to the rest of the district, with some variations due to trips or other school-specific events. The alternative school’s daily and weekly class schedules vary significantly from traditional schools. All school meetings occur every Wednesday when the entire staff and student body meets to discuss school improvements. Other regularly scheduled meetings occur Monday and Friday mornings between second and third periods and serve as a time when students and staff make announcements. Opportunities to engage in enrichment activities occur every Tuesday and Thursday for three to four periods each day. This is a time when students may choose from a variety of activities or projects to participate in (e.g. silk-screening, knitting, sports, drama, science labs, community service, and academic help). In addition, school-wide and community events happen throughout the year, including spring trips that offer education, fun, and outside-of-classroom learning (e.g., French/Spanish Trip for advanced language students).

Alternative School B has 27 full and part-time staff, and enrolls a maximum of 300 students in grades 6-12. School B is funded by the school district, with the same per pupil expenditure as every other school in the district. Because of its smaller size (in comparison with the larger traditional schools in the district), they receive a smaller annual budget. However, the school’s smaller size allows for a greater sense of community. One teacher stated that during evaluation meetings with seniors, “They recognize that being in our building where the classes are small, the school is small, where . . . I would say that ninety-five percent of the people could
name ninety-five percent of the other people in the building . . . There’s really something very valuable and important about that . . . This is sort of another safe place for them, an extension of home.”

School B has increased its enrollment over the past five years by almost forty students. As the numbers increase, there is a concern that this sense of community will weaken. One teacher believes that, “Beyond a certain number [of students] you can’t really know everybody, so those relationships are everything in a small school . . . If I know you, and you know me, and we have this relationship, there are certain behaviors that aren’t going to happen.”

In order to maintain individual relationships and a sense of community, each student in the school is part of a family group that meets twice a week throughout the year. Students choose which teachers and fellow students they would like to be grouped with, and guidance counselors form the groups based on students’ requests. Each family group consists of up to fifteen students and a faculty advisor.

One teacher described family group as, “homeroom, but this homeroom meets for forty minutes twice a week and it’s more than just attendance. Every family group is responsible for fundraising, and team building, and we kind of watch out for each other. And then twice a year we get together and do scheduling with the students.” When asked to further explain “watch out for each other,” this teacher stated,

If there is a student who has a discipline problem, I’m going to hear about it as [their] family group leader . . . Generally speaking we are going to try to handle this in-house. So, we have a lot of different avenues. There’s mediation and there’s an Alternative Community Court where students are actually hearing about a case and giving consequences. But, oftentimes the family group leader [is] brought in and kind of advocates for the student . . . [acts as] their representative, and [tries] to help them through . . . I might communicate with the parent. There might be a student who is having trouble keeping up with their work, so I would be the point person to help them. . .
We might have study sessions here. We might talk about study skills . . . There’s a lot that we do together in this group.

Interviews for this study occurred at the end of the school year. As a family group leader, this teacher had just completed two full days of meetings (averaging forty-five minutes) with each student in the group and their parents/caregivers. These meetings are a time to review the student’s progress toward graduation requirements, discuss course offerings, and develop possible schedules for the next year. This family group leader explained that the process involves “a lot of guidance . . . with the family discussing . . . options . . . ‘Which teachers do you think you work better with?’ ‘Which kind of course [should you take]?’ Some kids need more of a challenge. Some kids really need something that is going to build their confidence.”

Alternative School B is a school of choice. Students interested in attending must be a resident of the district, complete an application for enrollment, and visit the school. Applicants are then placed in an applicant pool and names are drawn by a lottery system each semester, as openings become available.

According to the principal, entrance to the school is mostly done at sixth grade, with a limited number of students admitted in higher grades through attrition. “We generally have anywhere from four to eight students leave in a given year, so pretty low numbers across the grades. We generally don’t accept twelfth graders because [of] our senior institute requirements and the service requirements. A senior would have to be . . . almost ahead of schedule to graduate . . . as a twelfth grade [transfer] here.”

Students are also selected from “sub-pools” in an effort to maintain a similar demographic profile to the rest of the school district (e.g., gender, special education, and eligibility for free or reduced priced lunch). According to the principal, “We have a high
demand for special education services from parents who I think feel a smaller school environment will serve their kids well.” Because of this, the school’s percentage of students receiving special education services is 15%-16%, slightly higher than the rest of the district.

The school has a strong applicant lottery. The principal estimates “that 25% of all families [entering 6th grade] in the district apply, and we take about 30% of them . . . [Of the] 400 to 500 fifth graders in the district . . . our application lottery usually consists of anywhere from 90 to 120 students that apply for . . . 42 spots.”

In order for students to graduate from School B, they must meet the New York State Education Department (NYSED) requirements (with the exception of Regents exams) and complete school-specific requirements including community service and career explorations. In addition, students prepare and present their final graduation by exhibition, including a team interdisciplinary graduation project, an individual senior project, and a graduation portfolio.

Final graduation exhibitions are presented to a committee comprised of the senior’s school counselor or administrator, family group leader, staff member(s), any adults the senior invites (including parents/caregivers), and a sophomore or junior from the school.

Mission

When teachers at School B were asked to describe its mission, one teacher explained that it is to “do the best job possible of helping all the students at this school reach their full potential in the context of global citizenship. It’s that tension between individual kids and the student body as a whole, and their desires, but balanced with the desires of humanity and the planet.” This teacher further explained that one way global citizenship is taught is by “valuing individuals. There’s a libertarian background to this school that comes out of the sixties that
says each individual is of value and that’s not only the students, it’s very much staff . . . This school is about people . . . finding their place in the world, and through that personal actualization and recognition being able to contribute.”

Another teacher added that the mission of the school is to cultivate a student who “is going to go out into the world with a sense of what it means to be a member of a community, and what their role and place is in that community. How to be an articulate young person. How to advocate for themselves and for others, and to have a thirst or a desire to be a lifelong learner.”

Mission Evaluation

When asked to describe how the school accomplishes its mission to develop global citizens, the principal gave the example,

This is what newspapers around the world report—x, y, z incident, and this is what the United States media is saying . . . I think we do a really stellar job in balancing multiple perspectives, higher order thinking, real critical, deep, don’t take things at face value. When we do bibliographies . . . they’re annotated bibliographies that students have to list the bias of the source . . . So, they’re really aware of bias and I think you need to be as a global citizen.

The principal added that, “In terms of requiring additional languages, I think we’re too conventional. I think we could do more. But, I think in terms of thinking, we are actually teaching kids to think globally, and more than in just a generic way.” This principal also believes that, “the service learning part of the school contributes greatly that the world is counting on you to not be just self-centered . . . Kids really put service, the commitment to service, high up there when they’re reflecting on the school. They feel that they understand to be a citizen is to be a servant.”

In comparison to when the school was first created, the principal believes, “The mission is still alive and well. I think we’re living in a much different world politically . . . [in terms of]
educational law and mandates.” He further stated that he believes the alternative school, “is at its best when it’s pushing that envelope . . . I think that’s when staff and students really fully appreciate the distinction—when faced with what we’re being asked to do and what we’re resisting . . . Why are we so anti-testing? Why are we philosophically opposed to grades? . . . What would happen to the school if we started giving grades—in terms of collaboration, and sharing work, and taking a risky class [that may influence a GPA]?”

Since the school does not give grades, or participate in most of the traditional exams used as measures of effectiveness, the superintendent was asked how he personally measures the school’s success:

Not by test scores. That’s probably the last thing you would look at there. I measure it by the engagement level I see when I walk in the classrooms. The engagement level I see when they’re doing things outside of the classroom. The engagement I see from the community, the alumni, the current folks in the building around policies and whatever it may be that the district is attempting to do or work with that school. Also, I measure success by the intellectual swagger I see from the young people. They ask great questions, regardless of [the] setting. They have very articulate, thought-provoking thoughts or words they use when they’re talking about anything . . . The intellectual swagger . . . that exists there every day. That I love.

The superintendent added, “You get a good sense of [the school’s success] at the graduation ceremonies each year when you hear educators talk about their young people and the young people talk about educators and the school . . . You will see that people there are truly passionate about what they built, and they own what they built as an organization.” He further stated that the school’s success is measured by a “portfolio of examples” including, “everything from their graduation rates, which are high, to the number of [people] that want to be in the school, the waiting list . . . to the public support and engagement around all that is that school.”

The principal added that another “qualitative data point is how many students come back to tell us what they’re doing and want to spend time staying connected to the school . . . I think
there’s a real deep pride of being part of this community and . . . I think there’s a pretty rich legacy.”

School B has its own Basic Education Data System Code (BEDS) with the NYSED, meaning it is a stand-alone school held accountable for its own results, not a program within another school. According to the superintendent, it is evaluated the same as any other school with regard to graduation rates and state assessed Adequate Yearly Progress. Neither the superintendent nor the principal were involved in the initial decision to have the school designated with its own BEDS code. But, the principal believes it is important for the independence and autonomy of the school, “so when we’re fighting for things like state waivers and non-grades . . . to share the same code with the other [traditional] high school in town, we would be as the smaller of the two, I think we would be pressured to conform.”

Leadership

According to the Framework of Essential Supports and Contextual Resources for School Improvement, “Leadership does not rest solely with the school principal. Instead, improving students’ learning and performance requires leadership from the faculty, the parents, and the community” (Sebring et al. 2006, 9).

The leadership structure of School B includes a full-time principal who reports directly to the superintendent, and a part-time assistant principal who was recently added to the staff to help with teacher observations two days each week. According to the principal, “I have a hard time justifying having two administrators for 300 students. And the only reason I want that is because of the state demands around observations. I can’t do all the APPR [Annual Professional
Performance Review] compliance stuff. I’m staying up until two in the morning right now trying to do end-of-the-year evaluations that are due.”

While the leadership structure appears similar to a traditional school environment, the actual leadership of the school and the decision-making processes are nontraditional. To accomplish its mission to develop global citizens, one of School B’s goals is to involve all staff and all students in direct governance of the school.

Principal’s Perceptions of School B’s Leadership

When the principal was asked to describe the governance or administrative structure of the school, he replied, “That’s a complicated question. It’s shared democracy from mostly among students and staff, to a lesser degree parents and caregivers.” There is a state mandated site-based council that meets on a regular basis with responsibilities that include making final hiring recommendations to the district Board of Education, which is responsible for hiring and issuing contracts. According to the principal, “I really defer a lot to [the site-based council], but I do assert myself. I do all the references [on applicants] and I’ll go back to committee and say, ‘We need to start over,’ . . . [And they] listen to me about that. I do reserve the right to do that.” He believes this is important because, “The biggest job a principal has is putting the right people in front of kids . . . Not in front of kids, next to kids.”

In addition to the council, the principal stated, “we have a very robust school-based democracy” where all students and staff share in the leadership of the school. School issues are discussed in family groups twice a week, and weekly all school meetings are “student-led, student-facilitated . . . Proposals and issues [are] presented and brought forward by . . . students and staff. [For example, a student might say], ‘I think we need to be more test-centered . . . I feel
like I’m not prepared for college.”’’ There will be a discussion and students can then present recommendations, saying, “‘I’m proposing that at [a] minimum, [the] two days before any state tests [be] dedicated to preparation.’”

In addition to all school meetings, all staff members share in the leadership of the school through staff meetings. According to the principal, “Staff have agreed that we only vote by consensus. We’re not doing any majority. So, one person can say, ‘I can’t support this. I’m not willing.’ And the rule is, ‘Can you live with this if the rest of the staff is on board?’ [And they’ll reply] ‘Yeah, I don’t think it’s the right thing, but I’m not blocking consensus,’ or ‘I’m blocking consensus.’”

The principal has purview to make decisions related to immediate health and safety issues, and “immediate disciplinary matters that I think rise above the level of taking it to a student court for confidentiality or severity.”

The principal believes “Empowering others is the sign of good leadership,” and he stated that, “I’m doing my job when I’m not working hard because . . . my job is to put everything in place to go smoothly. And when they don’t go smoothly, that’s on me . . . I feel the most confident when I can leave the school for three hours in the middle of the day and no one calls me. That’s great.”

The principal further views his role as “Keeper of the flame. [It’s] my job to do that, and other people’s jobs is to make sure I’m doing it with integrity.” When asked who those other people are, he replied, “My colleagues and my students and my parents.”

As keeper of the flame, the principal is responsible for protecting and promoting the foundational tenets of the school, including its democratic principles. This can be a challenge as
he stated, “Democracy is slow. It’s messy. It’s inefficient . . . And we’ve had staff ask, ‘Can’t you just make that decision [principal]? Democratically, we decide we don’t want to be democratic anymore with this.’ [And I reply], Well, I can, but we’re a different school then.” The principal added that, “There’s a humbling nature to not being autocratic. There are times when I wish I could just make a decision, and I can’t, so it’s painfully slow.”

The principal also believes that honoring the democratic process and shared decision-making process is an area “where I’m misunderstood a lot with my central office and other principal colleagues.” He provided an example, explaining a current issue at the school where he and the staff are in favor of changing to a block schedule, but students have voted against it.

[Other traditional administrators will ask] ‘Why couldn’t you just tell [the students] there’s going to be a new schedule next year?’ . . . [and I say,] because that’s not how it works. I have the same obligation to present an idea to the whole school, have them debate and discuss it, and again the students voted against it. The staff voted for it . . . [after that] it goes to a compromise committee where [a] site-based council team [asks students], ‘What is it . . . that you didn’t like about it?’, ‘What would have you support this?’, and then it’s re-presented.

The principal added that his role at district-level meetings is to be a voice for the alternative school, and its alternative philosophy of education by presenting nontraditional ways of handling situations. The principal believes the district leadership “know[s] that I’m going to push the envelope, so a lot [of] their job is pushing back.” He further stated that, “[The current superintendent] likes the innovation. He likes the boldness and the alternative interpretation of things,” and the principal believes that he and the superintendent have a positive relationship . . . I respect him . . . I think he’s a good manager . . . educator and leader . . . And I have learned from him in terms of his demeanor and he’s never confrontational. Very rarely. He’s really just a classy guy and charismatic . . . But I think we’re still guarded around each other in terms of some things anyway. [We’ll say], ‘I’ll take that under advisement’ . . . [or] ‘I hear what you’re saying. I’m not committing to that yet, but let me think about it.’
Teachers’ Perceptions of School B’s Leadership

When considering the principal’s leadership traits that contribute to the school’s success, one teacher stated, “I think [the principal] was steadfast in holding a deep commitment to the philosophy of this school, internal and external. So, we could absolutely count on the fact that [he] was going to fight for the values and principles of this school in a dogged way, with the powers that be and internally.” This teacher added, “The interface with central administration is probably the most important because that’s a survival issue for the school.”

Another teacher added that one of the principal’s key roles “as the leader of an alternative school [is] to regularly challenge the administration on how they are thinking, acting, processing. I think it’s really unique and I think it’s probably really difficult . . . to always have to be the one that’s pushing the envelope. But, I view that as also being one of his really primary responsibilities.”

With regard to the principal’s role in the community, one teacher stated, “We’re a public school . . . The interface with the community is absolutely key in terms of leadership, being a key spokesperson for the school philosophically and in other ways as well.” The principal’s role with the community is to promote and defend the values, philosophy, and mission of the school. According to another teacher, the principal has “been at his best . . . when the school itself is at risk. Because we’re so different, on occasion somebody in the community will try to . . . change our program, add to our population, change [our] population or get involved in how we run. These are the times when [the principal] has really stepped forward and really provided a lot of leadership.”
Within School B, teachers perceive the principal’s role to be multi-faceted. One teacher described the importance of the principal’s providing “support for teachers who are going for tenure. . . They need support. They need him to inform them . . . to observe and give them good feedback on their teaching.” This teacher added that other types of support include, “If there’s a problem or maybe a conflict with a parent, [the principal] has been really good about stepping in and backing teachers up.”

One of the most significant responsibilities of the principal of School B is to uphold the school’s alternative philosophy of education. One teacher provided an example of the principal’s commitment to the school’s democratic values, stating, “Since I’ve been here [the principal] has wanted to go to a block schedule, and every year he’ll roll it out, and discuss it, and have meetings about it, and bring it to the students to vote on it. And every year it gets knocked down and blocked and he said, ‘OK’, and he has never once said, ‘We’re going to a block schedule, too bad.’ He doesn’t do it.”

With many part-time staff at the school, the principal is the primary facilitator of how teaching duties are divided. According to one teacher, “that’s an absolute central role that impacts people’s feelings about their jobs in a pretty deep way.” This teacher further stated, “The principal has a gigantic impact on the climate of the staff, even more-so in this school . . . The principal is controlling FTEs [full-time equivalent distribution], and who gets hired for what, and really is core in the facilitation of hard conversations about some of the fundamental issues at the school.”

This teacher described the principal’s leadership style by explaining that he was “able to absolutely make use of and support the internal strengths of staff, students, families . . . which is
perhaps more important than some charismatic leader who can do that himself . . . He certainly enabled and allowed people to step up and really take leadership in positive ways.” This teacher believes, “It’s not an issue of delegating. It’s an issue of supporting the internal leadership and processes—that truly shared leadership at this school.”

As part of a democratically run school with shared leadership, another teacher stressed the importance of the principal’s being consistent “in dealing with problems. Responsiveness. Transparency. Ability to get people together. Because this school runs democratically, the principal needs to be able to get people on board with an idea or an initiative. Communication.”

One teacher explained that, “We’re involved in all the key decisions as a staff. So, that puts the principal in a more maybe facilitating, but sometimes even observing role than they would be in a traditional school.” Another teacher further described the challenges associated with shared leadership and decision-making at School B by stating,

Staff makes decisions by consensus which means that 100% of the staff . . . must agree if we’re going to make that big shift, which is a huge challenge, and I have a feeling it worked a lot better when there were just ten or twelve teachers . . . It’s such a tight system as far as we must agree. Things don’t happen without everyone giving a thumbs-up, which means sometimes things don’t happen, but we’re not making rash decisions, that’s for sure.

According to another teacher, trust and respect between the principal and teachers are important. “We’re a democratic school, so [the principal is] trusting us to make good decisions, for me to make good decisions personally with respect to my teaching, for the . . . department to make good decisions and directions that we want to follow. [And] supporting us in those directions.” This teacher further stated,

It’s trust and respect that go hand in hand, and it keeps coming back to community or unity . . . Working as a team. He trusts us and we trust him . . . [He] is my building principal, but I don’t really see him as being above me . . . I know that he does wield
some power over me, but for me to be able to really butt heads with him . . . with no concern with some negative repercussion. That he is really hearing me and taking in what I am saying, and having respect for what I’m saying. And he can push back and say, ‘I hear what you’re saying, but what about ____.’ This ability to have a dialogue with your building principal that is on such a mutual level of trust and respect is what I think is really powerful and really special.

Superintendent’s Perceptions of School B’s Leadership

According to the superintendent, when he was hired by the district several years ago, “they did a lot of interviewing. And I did a lot of interviewing and research prior to us coming together. It would be tough to be superintendent in this role and not understand and appreciate that [alternative] school’s approach. And, vice versa, they would have a tough time being a part of the district’s work if it wasn’t consistent with what I was thinking.”

The administrative structure of Alternative School B is similar to the traditional schools in the district. According to the superintendent, the principal participates in the same district meetings with other administrators and engages in the same conversations, including, “implementing many of the structures and initiatives that the district is promoting. Everything from [our] professional learning approach . . . to the tenets and philosophies embedded in our teaching and learning framework, and APPR . . . A lot of the things the district does, that school does as well.”

When asked to reflect on the balance between keeping the unique identity of School B and creating cohesiveness within the district, the superintendent stated, “It takes a lot of work on the leadership parties, including myself. Helping them understand that their philosophies and approaches are consistent with what I’m pushing here in the district.”

The superintendent believes School B is necessary because it provides an alternative option for students:
From my perspective all young people are at some risk because of the failure of education to innovate and do things differently to customize individual learning opportunities. So, with that belief, and that approach to what we put in place, [the alternative school] is an option that’s customized. Our [traditional] high school is an option that’s customized . . . We’re just simply looking for the best situation for all the young people with the resources we have.

The superintendent further explained,

The [local] high school is much more traditional—looks much more like a junior college than it does even a high school. The size. The approach to an eight period day. The way in which instruction is delivered does not fit the needs of all young people, which we know. I mean, I think everyone knows that in education. We are just fortunate enough to offer an alternative within our district. Again, not every child would thrive at [the alternative school].

The superintendent believes there are different outcomes for every school and that the alternative school requires a different type of leader than the traditional school. The principal of School B needs to be able to build relationships and build community. “Community is important everywhere, but community and buy-in, and appreciation, and understanding, [are] much more important at [the alternative school].”

The superintendent explained that the school’s alternative philosophy and practices periodically draw criticism. The school has faced challenges from people who “didn’t appreciate the approach of the school. Thought it was a resource drain. Thought that their practices were not appropriate.” According to the superintendent, a few years ago the alternative school building needed to be renovated. There were many conversations around whether to invest in the school or close it and move those students to a “school within a school” model in the traditional high school. After much debate, it was decided to invest in the facility and make the renovations.

Many of these challenges happened before the current superintendent arrived in the district, but he stated the challenges are ongoing. He believes the alternative school’s “approach
to teaching and learning . . . is going to be challenged by anyone who is stuck in the traditional way of thinking about education.” But, he further stated that facing these challenges has been rather easy for me because a lot of what the school embraces, and is about, is what I’m embracing, and what I’m about. So, it’s actually been a great place for me to speak to, point to as what’s possible as far as my vision. I’ve actually used that school to help push out some things at the [traditional] high school and middle schools, which is what alternative schools and charter schools were intended to do. It’s fortunate that I have one here.

The superintendent believes part of his role is to support the principal by encouraging him to “go out and talk about what it is you do and not be [concerned it is] something that is going to be inconsistent with what I think and what I do . . . Go out and talk and share.”

When reflecting on the leadership traits that have contributed to the current principal’s success, the superintendent stated,

He questioned and challenged everything. He vetted every thought. Every suggestion. Everything coming from the district he was thoughtful about and frankly he pushed back on everything just for process sake alone . . . That’s part of what [the alternative school] is about. Even if he completely agreed with something, he would offer a different perspective or different thought, way of thinking just to engage in process around messy democracy. That led to his success and a lot of buy-in there.

The superintendent appreciates these traits and believes that being the leader of an alternative school “founded on this approach to being somewhat autonomous and a bit different, alternative, that person is always going to have to push, and think differently, and challenge.”

In turn, the superintendent believes part of his role is to support the alternative school principal by, “continuing to have that principal understand and appreciate, and in most cases buy-in to the approach of the district. Having them be a silo or off on an island someplace won’t be good for the community or good for them. So, having them have some connections to the
district’s work, but also being appreciative of their attempt to be autonomous, and to innovate and incubate as well.”

The superintendent explained that keeping the school and principal attached to the rest of the school district can be a daily challenge that requires “multiple conversations. Many, many, conversations. Many, many, visits. Sharing information back and forth. So, instead of having them do their own thing and leaving them alone, I’m probably engaged with them as much or more-so than the other building.” The principal and superintendent are together in bi-weekly meetings, they touch base at least twice a week, and the superintendent visits the alternative school campus about every other week. According to the superintendent, it’s “just a lot of physical and virtual contact.”

When asked if there are special features of the alternative school context that drive his roles and responsibilities for supervising the alternative school principal, the superintendent replied,

It’s led to the kind of patience I have for that alternative school principal versus another principal. For example, I’m expecting the alternative school principal to push and to push back, not be as compliant, do all those things. Whereas, at the high school [I’ll say,] ‘Your observations are due at a certain day. We need those observations and with 150+ staff members I need them. It’s state mandated. Do it.’ When the alternative school is late, and they’re thinking about doing it differently, or want to try something, I have to be patient and instead of coming down, I’ve got to be able to say, ‘This is what you do.’

When asked to reflect on what he has learned about supervising, mentoring, and coaching an alternative school principal, the superintendent stated,

That oftentimes the culture is much more deeply embedded than you can even imagine. I had no idea that people embraced and appreciated this school going back the number of years it goes back here. So, attempting to make any kind of shifts or any perceived threat to them, threatens many . . . I wasn’t quite aware of that. I just figured I could suggest some things here or there and folks may roll with the punches . . . But no, this is much deeper than that. Other alternative situations I’ve studied and looked at have similar
deeply imbedded cultures. They’re alternative for a reason, and there are folks that have very, very strong feelings about it and oftentimes it goes back many, many years.

He believes that he has learned to work with this strong culture by learning that “Process is always number one. Process is oftentimes much more important than product.”

When asked if he tries to strike a balance between district-wide commonalities and the alternative school principal’s need to view his school as unique, the superintendent stated,

All the time. I have to understand that that principal is in a unique situation being there in the building every day where . . . their primary focus is to be unique. Whereas, I’m on the exact opposite [end] of the spectrum. I’m trying to create a system . . . and I have to work hard to make sure I’m doing it every day. Although I like individuality, I’ve got to always promote systems, where an alternative school principal always has to promote individuality . . . Those are just the stakeholder groups we both tend to most of the time, most days, and being in the middle together, get[ting] to a common place is what’s important.

The superintendent further stated that he maintains that common place by having “Many, many conversations, [and] a common mental model around vision for the school. I would say that . . . the principal there [and I] have a common vision for where we want the school to be.”

Parent-Community Ties

According to the *Framework of Essential Supports and Contextual Resources for School Improvement*, parent involvement is measured in two ways: “Teacher outreach to parents” and “parent involvement in the school” (Sebring et al. 2006, 22).

Parent ties with School B are established through an initial alignment with the school’s philosophy of alternative education and decision to enroll their child(ren). School B maintains connections with parents/caregivers by creating a culture of openness where they are encouraged to be on campus and provide input. The school has created structures that regularly engage
parents in their child’s learning, and provide a limited number of opportunities for active involvement in the school’s leadership.

According to the superintendent, ties with parents are especially important at Alternative School B. He believes parents need to have that deep understanding of what the school is about. I think that when one’s accepted into [the school], there’s such a parent orientation period and parents have to be involved in embracing it, and understanding it, in order for their child to be successful. Period. It’s not one of those schools where you can drop [your child] off and pick them up and expect things to be fine. You’ve got to really understand that commitment. And understanding what the school is about has been key for many, many years.

As a school of choice, parents are involved in School B from the onset by completing an application for their child(ren) to attend. The school’s handbook provides parents with an overview of the rules, responsibilities and requirements of the school, and parents attend information nights or schedule informational appointments with school personnel to better understand the alternative philosophy of education, including curriculum, instruction, and structure of the school.

The principal believes that “families probably feel more welcome into this school unlike any secondary school that I know . . . [We say to them], ‘We need you here. We need you to talk about your kids with us and give us insights at the beginning of the year, the middle of the year, and the end of the year.’” One teacher added, the principal is “always responsive. Parents are always coming in to talk to him.”

Parents have a formal, structured opportunity to actively participate in running the school as a member of the site-based council, but the principal stated that he believes there should be more wide-spread parent involvement in the democratic practices of the school. “I think they’re left out of the decision-making outside of site council . . . We [could be] better at communicating
what’s being discussed at our own school meetings online . . . I would like it for parents to be able to give comments, even if they aren’t empowered at this point to vote on certain issues.”

With regard to ongoing parent involvement in their child’s learning, one teacher explained, it’s “a tricky one at this age level because sixth through twelfth [grade] . . . kids are naturally starting to say, ‘Back off a little mom or dad,’ so, . . . we try to get parents into the school two to three times a year for face-to-face, sit down quality time with their student and their family group leader to do scheduling . . . or to go over their midyear evaluations.”

This teacher described midyear meetings stating,

The mid-year conferences . . . are about an hour and a half long. It’s a parent/caregiver, and the student, and the family group leader going over [the student’s] written narrative evaluations of first cycle and . . . incorporate[s] a component of the [student] showcasing some of their work . . . On a very tiny level it’s analogous to defending your thesis . . . We coach them . . . [saying], ‘Here are the questions we’re going to ask you. Think about what piece of work you are going to talk about. Be prepared to answer these kinds of questions.’

In addition to midyear evaluations, parents/caregivers have in-depth meetings with their child and his/her family group leader at the end of each school year. The student’s schedule for the following year is created during these meetings, based on an assessment of the student’s progress toward graduation requirements and student-specific interests and appropriate level of academic challenge. Just before graduation from the school, each senior has an exit interview. Parents/caregivers participate in this celebration of the student’s accomplishments as they discuss what they have learned and their plans for the future.

Other than these structured times when parents are directly involved in face-to-face discussions with their children and staff, teachers try to maintain ongoing communication with parents regarding student progress throughout the year. According to one teacher, “We want
communication to go both ways. I want parents to be in touch when they are concerned . . . trust
us enough to be in touch and ask us questions.” This teacher believes trust is developed, “by
reaching out, by being responsive. So, A—if I’m reaching out a lot and [parents] know that I’m
there, and B—if they get in touch with me, and they know that I’m responding, the trust is built.
I think we are so busy, a lot of staff have trouble responding immediately a lot of the time . . . I
think we need a little bit of a change to slow down our day so that teachers can respond more
quickly.”

With regard to ties with the community, the principal believes, “Our best ambassadors
are students who do community service. Last I checked with my community service
coordinator/English teacher, this year we have had students in like ninety-six different
community organizations from repairing recycled bikes, to nursing homes, to engineering
offices.” Another teacher believes that the school’s community involvement is

huge because we reach out constantly . . . Students are required . . . to volunteer
somewhere for an extended period, so [the school’s service coordinator] reaches out all
over the place, and people all over the community know they can call [the coordinator]
and say, ‘We need volunteers, can you connect us with students?’ So, we have a real
connection with the community and I think among certain areas of the community we’re
really respected as people that do a lot to help out the food pantry, . . . nursing homes, . . .
youth farm.

At a minimum, students at School B are required to complete sixty hours of community
service before graduation. One teacher believes these community service activities not only
benefit the community, but are essential to students’ development. During senior exit interviews,
“you see certain themes coming through again and again, and that’s one of them. Community
service . . . seeing their ability to serve the community as a central part of who they are.”

The school’s interaction with the community is a two-way partnership. Students provide
resources to the community through community service, and the school relies on the community
for educational resources, and support to meet students’ non-academic needs. One teacher stated, “I think we all [interact with the community] in our own sort of narrow way” for supplies or expertise that enrich projects or classes at the school.

Other community resources provide non-academic support to students going through a difficult time. The principal explained that the school relies on the community, “All the time. We work very closely . . . our high school counselor is a former family therapist herself. She is very well connected to [other] counselors and we’re very close with families. We’ve had . . . more mental health issues now than ever before . . . Kids are under a lot of pressure . . . I think we are very proactive in working with kids and families.”

**Teachers’ Capacity & Commitment**

“While parents are their children’s first teachers, the school faculty holds the keys that unlock students’ intellectual development” (Sebring et. al. 2006, 12). According to Sebring et al. (2006), Teachers’ Capacity & Commitments, or Professional Capacity, includes teachers’ expertise in their content area, commitment to the school, ability to work well with others, belief in their responsibility toward change, and continuous improvement through professional development.

According to the principal of School B, when he first started at the school nine years ago, “the average tenure of the staff was eighteen to twenty-two years on the job.” Over the past few years there has been an influx of new teachers, which created some challenges with “old guard staff who care deeply and [have] real deep pride in what they created, and some resistance to change,” and “allowing the new blood to have the same privilege of being pioneers themselves.” But, the principal believes that changing of the guard has been navigated well.
School B is comprised of twenty-seven staff members, many of whom are part-time; some have shared responsibilities with other schools in the district. According to the superintendent, the principal has “flexibility on hiring . . . The people he brings in are the people he brings in, versus the district placing people there.”

The principal plays a critical role in teachers’ responsibilities by distributing time, deciding who is full-time and who is part-time. With many part-time staff, this offers the principal staffing flexibility. According to the principal, when making decisions on who receives additional time, he “favor[s] people who are the most committed, and the most involved, and the most creative.” He also stated that “the hardest thing for a principal, I think, is to exit a teacher that is harming kids, literally harming them by not bringing their best . . . Kids’ time is far too valuable to have them subjected to an uncommitted, unskilled, passionless teacher and that’s what I feel responsible for.” He also believes, “the most important thing a principal does is surround himself, herself and students he’s responsible for with the best, most passionate, creative educators and then trust them enough to get out of their way and do their thing.”

The principal believes this is an important part of developing teachers’ capacity and commitment—“Trust and empowerment.” And further stated, “I think teachers are in awe of each other here because they are getting to see what it looks like to see another teacher be given the creative license to do something. And wow! I think there is a real high esteem and a real badge of honor colleagues feel here.”

Teachers are given flexibility to create their own courses and curriculum. As a result, one teacher explained that

almost everything that happens here is a brainchild of that teacher and is happening based on their passion. So, we have [a teacher] who is a former attorney and he’s teaching a
middle school social studies course called Trials of the Century and he has an integrated law course with middle schoolers and they love it . . . He’s teaching from his knowledge . . . I’ve done a tremendous amount of [a specific type of writing in my career], so this is an area I know really well . . . so when we’re talking about [conducting] interviews and the kids are like, ‘Should I call or email?’ [I reply], ‘Thank you for asking me that question,’ . . . because we are going to have this great, detailed discussion about the pros and cons of each, because I’ve been there.

Teachers oftentimes rely on their own expertise for course and curriculum development. According to one teacher, “I don’t think we have made good use of the resources that are out there in terms of professional development other than our own internal resources,” but another teacher explained that this year a group of traditional and alternative school teachers were given an opportunity to meet throughout the year with consultants to discuss alternative methods of teaching. This opportunity was birthed from within the district and according to this teacher it has been

really fun to be in a room with the same group of core people talking about teaching and . . . it’s inspiring . . . [It’s] particularly meaningful to us as a department because we all went together . . . We would come back and have our Thursday morning meeting time together, and we could sort of process that, and talk about how that’s going to relate . . . [We ask each other], ‘What have you done?’ ‘Oh, I tried this thing last week based on the workshop we were at, and this is what happened.’

This teacher believes this has been a valuable experience “because I think so often we do professional development . . . and it’s all great when we’re there, and then we go back to school and [say], ‘I don’t have time for that,’ or ‘There’s nobody to reflect on that with.’”

This is an example of the shift in climate the superintendent has felt since coming to the district. He believes there have been increased opportunities to connect the alternative and traditional schools for professional development and shared learning from each other:

I think [the alternative school staff] really feel appreciated and embraced by the district. From what they say to me and what I feel when I’m there, they feel like I know what they are about and I want it to continue and I’ve seen that shift. I’ve seen them taking more chances. I see more engagement of their staff with other staff members in the district,
coaching of other staff members in the district. We have several administrators in other buildings coming from that school as a teacher or administrator. So, I see a lot of what’s happened there moving into other places in the district.

The principal added that teachers participate in some district-level professional development opportunities, but he believes “the expertise is in the room” and further explained that oftentimes the school staff decides what they want to work on, and then “teachers elect peers to lead them through initiatives like equity and inclusion work.”

One teacher provided an example of how the staff shares expertise with each other, developing a professional learning community:

[A teacher] will bring in an assignment, or a rubric, and we’ll all take a look at it, sort of critique it in a very formalized way . . . There was a pretty amazing moment [once] when I brought in a rubric that I’d made and I had to sit and kind of listen to a little fish bowl discussion as [the other teachers were] . . . talking about positives and negatives . . . I walked away and the rubric had notes all over it. I studied rubrics in college. I’ve been doing them all my career, but I heard all of these great ideas because we have all of these professionals in the room with different perspectives . . . I now take it to the next level and improve this very important part of my instruction. So, we do have a lot of opportunity to learn from each other.

Another teacher explained that, “I think more of the instructional coaching support . . . comes from within [my] department. We get along really well. We really like each other, so we’re always talking about, ‘What would you do with this?’ or ‘What do you think about this idea?’ or ‘How about this for a problem solving opportunity?’”

One teacher added that the “ability to work together, and commitment to the school, has been fundamental at the core of our ability to function at all as a school. If we didn’t have those things, we wouldn’t exist.” This teacher added that, “There are individual structures, programs that we’ve put in place . . . like the salad bar, like the community service [program] . . . and those are things that aren’t imposed from the outside. Structures of all school meetings and family
group meetings . . . programs that are typically created by individuals [with] follow-through by individuals . . . in a school that cares about that.”

When asked to further reflect on changes that have led to the school’s success, this teacher described a current example, emphasizing the importance of commitment over time:

I think changes come sometimes with strengths of individuals at this school. I think the community service program at this school is absolutely an exceptional example of impact on a large number of young people . . . [I] honestly think [the current coordinator of the program] has tremendous responsibility for that being the case . . . We had five or six people before [this coordinator] of which I loved, but [this coordinator] has stuck with it. He had a vision over a period of time.

This teacher added, “We’ve built these programs . . . that deeply address some of . . . [our] fundamental goals and . . . [that’s due to] individuals putting in decades and decades of time. [Knowing] this school really well. Really [caring] about it.”

Another teacher added that commitment to this school involves offering to take on additional responsibilities outside traditional teaching duties that include teaching special projects, serving on different committees, helping organize school events, and coordinating and supervising trips and activities off campus.

This teacher believes these additional activities provide, “opportunities to interact with other staff people that I wouldn’t normally get to interact with . . . To work with community members, with kids in a nontraditional classroom setting is really a key piece, because sometimes the kid that is bombing in [my] class [is] blowing me away in [a different] project.”

This teacher further explained that these extra duties are not assigned; teachers “sort of self-appoint into spots that we feel comfortable with and think we would be good at.” Overall, this teacher stated, “It’s the community. We’re all working together to work cooperatively to get stuff to happen. So, we’re all wearing many different hats.”
According to another teacher,

You can’t work here unless you’re committed to it . . . It requires such a commitment. I don’t get work done here during the day. I used to get all my work done during the day at [my previous school] and I don’t get anything done here. It’s such a busy place, and we run the place ourselves . . . Not only am I the teacher, but I’m also a guidance counselor, kind of. And I’m also [an] administrator, kind of . . . all these little roles we play . . . to be here you have to be committed or otherwise it’s just not going to work.

There have been times when this expectation of commitment has resulted in staff members leaving the school. The principal stated that, “There are colleagues that leave us and [say], ‘I love what you’re doing, but I’ve got a family too and it’s too much.’” But, the principal also believes that

that’s the deal. People are willing to work more hours and do all of that because they know that they get the creative license to teach. And it’s harder work. There are very few teachers [here], if any, that are teaching multiple sections of [the same] classes. So, [our teachers are] doing four to five preps a day, where in most traditional schools you’re teaching economics three periods a day and you’re teaching world government two periods a day. [Those teachers] have two preps max. And, [in the traditional school] they’re not project based . . . It’s a lot easier to teach, [but] it’s boring . . . I don’t think our teachers here [at the alternative school] are bored. They’re exhausted.

One teacher believes,

Every teacher is really committed, [and] every teacher is teaching something that is really close to their heart too, which is a really interesting part of the school. If I continued in my old career [in another school], I would have been teaching . . . [a] curriculum [that] would have been at least partially established . . . I would have been teaching certain . . . [materials] whether or not I appreciated them. But, we [at this school get to] choose all of our curriculum, and we change it year to year, sometimes based on the population in front of us, [and] based on student feedback.

This teacher further stated,

I think people really want to be here, and they really love the environment . . . I can see it would be really difficult to leave here to go back to a place where I’m [formally addressed by students] . . . [Here] I’m respected enough to create the curriculum I want. No one is handing me a textbook and telling me what pages to teach. And I get to really have connections that have been life-long connections. There have been students that
have graduated that I still connect with, and I would have a really hard time giving that up.

When the superintendent was asked to reflect on teachers’ commitment at School B, he stated,

It goes back generations. For many, many years . . . and once you’re a part of the culture, you’re always a part of the culture. So, even retired teachers, or teachers who’ve moved on, stay connected and offer mentorship and guidance to teachers and educators who are coming in. The [founding] principal is still very much a part of what is happening in the school . . . Retired educators are there often providing professional development. So, that culture is continuing to be embedded through different experiences of many, many folks who’ve been there. That’s been key . . . The culture that exists among staff right now is a true professional learning community in every sense of the word.

**Student-Centered Learning Climate**

“A fundamental requirement of schools is to create a safe, welcoming, stimulating, and nurturing environment focused on learning for all children” (Sebring et al. 2006, 13). This *Essential Element* includes high academic standards and caring support.

In order to create and maintain a safe and orderly environment, School B outlines individual “rights,” including feeling safe and respected, and individual “responsibilities” that include keeping the school safe, and respecting other people’s feelings and property. These rights and responsibilities are part of School B’s emphasis on building community within the school. According to the principal,

For us to do what we do requires knowing ourselves well, meaning everybody in the community knows everybody . . . Size and the deliberate, conscientious efforts to make room for building community. A lot of schools build impressive academic [structures] . . . [but] they leave the school culture to chance . . . This school . . . is really deliberate in saying, ‘We’re going to put community at the core of everything we do.’ And we believe when you do that, good things will happen academically.

According to the teachers, the students recognize this sense of community as one of the school’s strengths. One teacher stated that during senior meetings when students are asked to
reflect on their time at the school, “almost every single one of them identifies the sense of community as being one of the number one most meaningful things in their time here.”

Developing positive relationships with students is one important aspect of community building and developing a safe and welcoming place for all students. According to the principal, this is accomplished by “making time deliberately in our schedule to not be solely academic . . . [On] Tuesday afternoons, classes stop every week and I can go running with kids. The math teacher can go play floor hockey with kids. The Spanish teacher can go to a nursing home with a group of kids and do service with them. It’s relationship, relationship, relationship.”

One teacher added that there are few disciplinary issues at the school. “Students are really respectful here in general. We’re on a first name basis, they call me [by my first name] and there’s nothing really to rebel against. They are free to be themselves . . . We engage each other on a personal level and . . . after seven years [from grades six through twelve] we really get to know each other.”

The principal provided an example of how this sense of community and really knowing each other is important to parents as well. After a recent school shooting tragedy in another state, the principal polled people to gain input about School B’s safety. According to the principal, one response that struck him was from a father who stated, “what gives him the biggest sense of security in sending his daughter to this school is that everyone knows her. She’s not anonymous.” The principal believes, “that’s a real deep sense of security that I think we provide.”

Another part of building community is by creating a sense of ownership. One teacher described measuring the school’s success by “what people say, and the patterns of what they’re
saying that continue to indicate, if not deepen, the commitment that students have at this school. To this being their home. Their place that they really care about and . . . that’s as strong as it’s ever been.” This teacher further explained, “I think there is . . . more of a generalized ownership of the school . . . [displayed by] how quickly kids buy-in to the school. How quickly they get offended when the school is [verbally] attacked and how much they love this community and feel for this community.”

This sense of ownership is developed by students being trusted, feeling respected, and given responsibility for the overall school and their own learning. The principal stressed the importance of “Trust. I think students feeling that it’s not disingenuous. Where they feel respected for their ideas and they can present an idea and not have it squashed and rejected . . . [where teachers will say to a student], Wow, I never thought about it that way. Tell me more.” The principal added, “There’s a quote I use [by] Emerson . . . ‘The secret of education lies in respecting the pupil.’ It’s true. [When] kids feel heard, respected, honored, they will do anything.”

The principal provided a recent example of trusting, respecting, and honoring students. The day he was interviewed for this study, he had just returned by bicycle from a field day with students at a local park. He told the story of one of the students with him who had recently participated in a thirty mile bicycle ride as the culmination of a six week session on how to fix a bike. The principal stated, “I’m the principal and the only adult riding back to school right now and [this] sixth grader, new to the school, says, ‘I should lead us back.’ I’m like, ‘Why is that?’ [The student says], ‘I was just on the bike trip. I learned all the rules and such, and [calling the principal by his first name], you weren’t on the trip so trust me.’ I’m like, OK I get it.” On the way back the student asked the principal, “Do you really have to leave? I was just getting to
know you.” The principal reflected on this scenario stating, “He’s taking the lead, but he’s still saying, ‘You have a role here too.’ It’s pretty cool . . . Pretty unique. I don’t remember being a sixth grader and telling my principal, ‘I think you’d better follow me.’”

Another teacher was interviewed for this study the morning after spending the evening with twenty-three students during which they talked about the class they had just completed and discussed the school in general. According to this teacher, when reflecting on the school, students speak about the importance of respect and, “how teachers show their respect to students and how students show their respect to teachers. And what it means to respect in both directions and how absolutely central that is to student achievement, to the success of the school.”

This teacher believes, “It’s nuanced and it’s not just a protocol you follow. I think there are philosophical pieces about genuinely appreciating and respecting young people in an authentic way. But, it’s also strategies, and how you talk to them, and how you apply consequences, and how you maintain your standards, but also listen.”

This climate of trusting students and showing respect is evidenced in the school’s democratic principles, and is supported by the superintendent. He believes the school’s “approach. [Their] message to democracy and the students owning it, leading it, is consistent to my approach to teaching and how we need to empower young people to take control of their spaces and their curriculum and their learning.”

One teacher added, “Everything happens for the students . . . I think in almost every sense possible this place is student-centered because it’s democratic.” While the school’s foundation of active democracy creates a sense of ownership and student empowerment, this teacher further explained that,
This is their place and it’s a little harder sometimes because students can come and go. They can go anywhere in the school they want during lunch. When they arrive at school, they are free to roam, find a teacher, or socialize with their friends . . . One big change for me from moving from my traditional school to here was I had quiet office hours where there were no students in my wing before or after school, or during lunch, or even during study hall times. But now, that this is such a student-centered place, where they really have freedom . . . I don’t have as much solid time . . . So, in a way, learning, it’s all about the students . . . If they need help with a question they are going to come right in and find me if they can, if they want to.

This sense of ownership provides students with freedom and responsibility. School B has structures and processes in place to ensure students are empowered in leading the school. According to one teacher, there are “structures that the school began with—really pretty central, power dynamics in relationships, school meetings, the committees, power being vested in students . . . We have a commitment that says if we can’t get the kids on board, we can’t do things . . . Clearly [students] know they have power, and that’s important in terms of the real sense of ownership at this school.”

All students and staff also participate in weekly all school meetings. According to one teacher,

students or faculty or staff will write proposals and send it to this agenda committee who will then look at them and bring them to the All School Meeting . . . [where] there is this whole process about debating and voting and, yes, something will happen and a big change will be made because students have asked for it . . . Even if the changes aren’t made . . . we’ll get the message that students feel a certain way . . . One shocking proposal this semester was a student requested that teachers [better prepare] students for state exams . . . It’s something that even though we have to participate in some [exams], we are exempt from many . . . We don’t want to teach to the test. We want to save our time for [things] we think are more important. But students were saying, ‘At least give us some preparation,’ and I think a lot of us heard their call.

As a result of this sense of ownership through leadership and empowerment, one teacher believes students “learn that the world is theirs. They learn to think critically, and they develop a lot of different skills that are going to be relevant to their lives.”
The principal plays an important role in maintaining the democratic principles of the school by actively encouraging student voice in school decisions. According to one teacher, “[The principal] is adamant about the student voice being important. We don’t want staff to just make a decision and not have [the student] voice heard . . . [The principal is] adamant that we have two [student] representatives on our Board of Education. Even though the Board of Education said ‘Hey, send us one representative,’ he always sends two, a boy and a girl and they show up and no one turns them away.”

Another teacher added the importance of the principal being able to, “keep it real with [students]. That’s a tricky role for him because . . . it’s got to be really clear that he is sort of at the helm of the ship, but that the voice of the student body is heard, and is important, and is valued, and is reflected in—I want to say his actions. Somehow what he’s doing the kids know and understand that he’s hearing what they’re saying and somehow there’s something tangible about that for them.” This teacher further stated, “An open door is big. There are very few kids that would hesitate to knock on [the principal’s] door and even open the door when he’s in there.”

In addition to actively participating in the leadership of the school, students are expected to take a leadership role in their own learning. One teacher explained that students “know that . . . if they think [something] isn’t right in the way we are running the school or courses, they let us know . . . One thing I learned right away, if kids don’t really like the course they are in they are going to let you know. . . . I’ve had a really hard time sometimes when kids were like, ‘Yeah, this is boring. This isn’t working for me.’” This teacher added that, “[If] enough students get together and say, ‘We want a course on such and such’ . . . it could happen. It doesn’t happen often, but they know it could.” According to this teacher, another way students have ownership
of their learning is by working, “at their own pace. Students can accelerate or not and they can choose electives. So, if a student decides they want to go in-depth in English, they can take more English courses. Electives are a big part of it. They really have a big choice in what they take. There are a few requirements between sixth and twelfth grade, but I’d say eighty percent of the courses they take are because they’ve chosen them.”

When the superintendent was asked if there is a difference in the academic rigor of the traditional school and the alternative school, he replied,

This is a conversation we are having within our organization right now. What is academic rigor? Is it more work? or Is it more thinking? I’m seeing more thinking in situations at [the alternative school] than I am in any other place in our organization right now. I’m seeing more work, and homework, and task at our [traditional] high school than I am seeing in any other place in our organization right now . . . Those are the deep conversations . . . You have engagement versus strategic compliance. They’re huge differences. I see much more strategic compliance here [at the traditional school] and much more engagement in [the alternative school] than I see in any other place.

One teacher at School B explained that,

Part of my mission is I have lessons and it’s not informational, and it’s not just skill based, but critical thinking is a big part of it . . . [In my classes] we’re not just going to read a short story . . . We’re going to read something that might get [students] thinking about something like human rights. They are constantly reflecting on their own learning. That’s a big part of it. Students are asked regularly, whether orally or in writing to reflect on what they are doing, how they are doing, what they can improve . . . They are always analyzing who they are, where they stand in the world.

Another teacher further described spending the previous evening with students discussing a course they had just completed. As they reflected on what they learned, students expressed “their sense of, ‘I entered not caring much or knowing much about the world. And I exited, first of all knowing more than my parents about the Middle East and other things, but also developing my sense of who I am and what I believe in the world.’”
This teacher believes that, “In the school overall, . . . [students] move through a similar process of coming to an understanding of ‘Oh, I’m part of a community. I have a certain kind of responsibility to the world, and to my fellow human beings. And I can’t just ignore that.’ . . . I think it’s a critical part of the structure of school governance.”

According to the principal, the school is structured in unique ways to challenge students to critically think about their learning, including self-reflection. He explained that school stops several times a year and [we] have families actually walk through the door . . . Starting tomorrow, there are no classes here. Thursday and Friday there will be hour long, at minimum, conferences with every student in the school [and his/her parent/caregiver] planning their schedule for next year. Talking about what this year has been like . . . Who they were when they started. Who they are now . . . This is when we ask students to think about their learning and they have to write about it. They have to write their own narrative. It’s really the metacognition piece around thinking about thinking, and thinking about who you are as a learner is critical.

When the superintendent was asked to reflect on how he measures academic learning at School B in comparison with traditional schools, he replied,

A portfolio of information. Everything from what they can do to what they know and are able to share through conversations. Through performance tasks. Through demonstration. It’s, from my perspective, a much better way to show what one knows when compared to a fifty question multiple choice test . . . And we also respect, appreciate, and depend on our educators’ expertise and them having a clear understanding of what it takes to be college and career ready.

School B also provides support services for those who are struggling academically or going through a difficult time. According to one teacher, when a student needs additional academic support, they receive support from their family group leader, and may be referred to the response to intervention team. There is an afterschool homework club where students can go for English help. And, “it’s sort of an open campus so students can find teachers anytime and say, ‘I need some help with something.’”

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According to another teacher, support services are provided to students Everywhere. There [is a] . . . middle school resource room teacher [and] high school resource room teacher. The teaching assistants that push into the classroom. The kids that are pulled out as need be . . . One of us [teachers] will offer zero period help one day a week. Somebody will offer a ninth period help session. We have project-based learning on Tuesday afternoons and Thursday mornings . . . [each with] two splits, and every split [has] academic support offered . . . In a traditional school it might be called a study hall, but these are study halls with focus—there’s math help, language help, English help.

This teacher further explained that students can choose which split project-based learning or “help split” they want to attend. For example, students can choose different places they want to go. They can go to African drumming, [or] soccer, or maybe biology lab, or math help, or orchestra. It’s a time for experiential, project-based learning so the options are endless. But, there’s always . . . academic support available . . . At lunch time . . . The math department has a tendency to sit downstairs in [a classroom] and that has always been historically a place for [students] to . . . get extra help if they want.

According to this teacher, school officially begins at 9:05 a.m., but zero period is a free period that begins at 8:15 a.m. when “teachers [are] coming in early and they let students know, ‘I’m going to be here early if you want to come in and get some extra help.’”

This teacher’s availability to students who need help extends beyond the school day:

I have somebody that regularly will call me on the weekend and they are stuck on a homework problem, and it’s sixty seconds on the phone that just gets them right over that hump so they can see the assignment through to completion. It is just about community and taking care of each other. It doesn’t matter if I’m helping [another teacher’s] student or my student . . . It’s just a sense of community, of everybody taking care of everybody else and just doing what we need to do.

When asked whether it is the student’s responsibility to ask for help or do they receive a tap on the shoulder, one teacher explained that,

It depends on where the student is in terms of their taking responsibility for their own learning. They are all across the board. Sometimes they need the tap on the shoulder. Sometimes they need the call home . . . We have a flag system which is kind of a warning
system. Green flags get sent home when you’re doing great. Yellow means we have to rein it in a little. Red means we are having some big problems we need to work out. So, it depends. And the school is small enough and we know who is going to come in on their own. We know who needs the tap. We know who needs the phone call home. [It] depends on the kid.

Another teacher emphasized the importance of knowing individual students:

Sometimes I’ve seen in other schools kids that ‘opt out’. [They] attend, but ‘opt out’ or are marginalized . . . [One thing that is pretty great here is that] we really respect the individual here and I really love that about this school. If there’s a kid that is choosing for one reason or another to not really complete their assignments, that’s not a reason to marginalize a kid. There’s respect there for an individual. Something is wrong where they’re not respecting themselves and not able to get this done. So [we] really continue to build relationships . . . I think that’s part of it too. Each kid really matters.

With regard to non-academic support services, one teacher explained they are provided by everybody. We strive to make sure that every student in the building feels like they have a go-to person or people . . . [The school nurse], and social worker, and school psychologist, and our support teacher, and our middle school counselor in particular because she’s really valuable at dealing with drama . . . They’re sort of the key point people for many people. Especially the nurse because everyone knows where she is and can find her quickly. But . . . all of us from the custodian, to the teaching assistants, to the teachers, to the building principal, to the secretary—we’re all there all the time for whoever needs us and I think [students] know that. It’s that sense of community.

The principal added that the school is very proactive in working with kids and families. Sometimes it’s through diversion, pre-probation type of things when we see kids making repeat decisions about being aggressive toward adults or other kids; Drug related issues, cutting, mean girl type of behavior, cyber bullying. We’re not immune to any of that. In fact, it feels [like] as the school has increased in enrollment . . . I feel an appreciable difference in the school culture in terms of that. And maybe just . . . the economy and there [are] more kids struggling . . . [There have been many] more behavior issues the past two or three years since we increased our enrollment than my prior six or seven years.

Instructional Guidance

“A safe, nurturing climate sets the stage for learning, but instruction is the single most direct factor that affects student learning” (Sebring et al. 2006, 14). According to the Framework of Essential Supports and Contextual Resources for School Improvement, the element of
Instructional Guidance, or Ambitious Instruction, includes curriculum alignment and intellectual challenge.

About ten years after the school was established, a committee was formed to “re-evaluate and redefine” School B’s curriculum. The committee consisted of students, staff, and parents who engaged in a lengthy process to examine the school’s overall program, and means of assessment with a focus on exploring what students should value, know, and be able to do before they graduate. And, furthermore, how that learning should be evaluated and assessed. As a result of this extensive work, staff, with feedback and input from students and parents, created a core curriculum, student-generated in-depth studies of advanced explorations, and the senior graduation exhibitions.

According to one teacher, “Graduation by Exhibition . . . was one of the more profound changes [that have led to the school’s success] . . . And I think the greatest aspect of that is forcing us to look at curriculum and teaching it . . . In the early years the teaching [was], ‘You do that yourself.’ And Graduation by Exhibition forced us to at least . . . identify over a period of years, ‘What are we teaching to? What are the outcomes?’ and then to a lesser degree, ‘How do we assess those?’”

When asked if curriculum is aligned across grade levels, one teacher replied,

It’s not that simple. At the high school level . . . it really emerges out of . . . department areas. Math, science, humanities, the arts [are] much more individualized . . . The foreign languages is a cohesive department together in a lot of ways . . . We have Graduation by Exhibition outcomes. Those have been pretty central in driving [curriculum] . . . [However], It is less clear how central they are right now. Whether we’re falling back to, ‘You kind of do your own thing and make sure it fits in there,’ as opposed to it being driven by that.

The principal would like to see more curriculum alignment across disciplines, and stated,
I’d like the math and science . . . [to] have their PLCs [Professional Learning Communities] together . . . To be planning curriculum together. We’re not there. We should be. I think we were closer to being there before this changing of the guard [with the recent influx of new staff members]. I would like to see more interdisciplinary course offerings and more unconventional ones like an English and a science class, or a PE [Physical Education] and a social studies class. Just be inventive.

Another teacher stated, “Part[ly] . . . because our department isn’t sequential for the most part. We don’t really have this spectrum where in ninth grade they learn this, tenth grade this, eleventh grade this . . . I think we do a really great job in general, but I want to make sure that certain formal writing skills happen every year.”

The level of curriculum alignment differs by department. Another teacher stated, “We as a . . . department have developed our own curriculum . . . especially in the high school level. There’s a beginning, intermediate and advanced level . . . that has some common themes that are spiraling through that curriculum which has to do more and more with that whole idea of process and problem solving.”

When asked to reflect on the role of the principal in making learning and teaching a priority, one teacher believes the principal’s responsibility is “hiring the right people. Evaluating and observing . . . You’ve got to have good teachers doing good stuff.”

Teachers interviewed for this study from School B identified the availability and distribution of time as a significant role of the principal in providing instructional guidance. One teacher described the principal’s responsibility as, “not to do the work, or even necessarily to facilitate the work, but it’s to orchestrate the facilitation of the work.”

Another teacher added that the principal “does support us sometimes having a day out of the classroom to work in groups . . . Whether it’s some sort of initiative we’re trying to get together—to create a portfolio for example, [or] we’re trying to align our portfolios into the same
kind of format.” According to this teacher, “There’s been a lot done as far as aligning the portfolio . . . so that we’re locked in as far as everyone has the same expectation for what a portfolio looks like; what kind of items will be in there. We’ve done a lot of that foundation and then we’ve been on our own with a lot of the other things.”

Portfolio alignment and Graduation by Exhibition requirements provide parameters for teachers to develop their curriculum. According to one teacher, “We don’t have textbooks. We’re not state oriented toward state assessments and state tests. [As a teacher], you create your own things. They need to align by our Graduation by Exhibition . . . [but] there’s a tremendous amount of individual autonomy.”

One of the teachers gave an example of the level of flexibility teachers have in developing a new course:

I think in another school you might have to spend a couple of years designing [a course] . . . and getting it just perfect . . . That doesn’t happen here and that was the biggest shock when I first came. I still had my job in [the other school] and I was just coming to meet with teachers. I came to a department meeting and they said, ‘So, what do you want to teach next year?’ And I said, ‘What do you mean?’, [And they said,] ‘What do you feel like teaching?’ and I couldn’t believe it.

While teachers are given flexibility in developing their course curriculum, the principal is responsible for conducting teacher observations. According to the principal, the alternative school abides by NYSED and district guidelines, including APPR. When asked if the Common Core standards have impacted the alternative school, the principal stated, “It does to a degree. We try not to. My feeling [is] . . . the Common Core is going to reflect good teaching, and it’s going to reflect bad teaching too. I think it’s done that to a degree. I would agree that the stronger teachers in the school were already doing Common Core not knowing, without naming it.”
When the principal was asked what he looks for during observations, he stated, “Respect, and a non-hierarchical classroom.” And added,

I often say [to teachers], ‘The first thing I’m looking for is, How long does it take for me to find you in the class? If you’re in the front of the room, I’m not impressed. I’m not here to see you, I’m evaluating students’ learning.’ . . . [I’m] looking for [a] student-led classroom [that is] engaging. . . I’m looking for questions more than I am answers. I’d much rather see kids leave here not talking about what they learned, but what they want to learn—[Asking], I wonder why _____?

The superintendent added, “Teacher as the facilitator. Walking into the classroom and really not knowing who the teacher is. And that’s inherent in what they do.”

According to the superintendent, elements of effective instructional guidance also include, “The student empowerment piece. Allowing students to determine where they go with the curriculum, assessment, and instruction. Having that student voice be at the center and first as they decide instructional programing . . . It’s most important when I think about instruction there.”

One of the teachers described strategies used to promote effective teaching and learning as

a lot of clarity, mutual respect, and expectation that we are a community of learners. So, if somebody raises their hand, and I come over to a table and they ask me a question, I can say, ‘What did ‘Joe’ say?’ . . . I’m the coach, and so is everybody else in the classroom . . . And there’s lots of open dialogue about that. So, I’m asking ‘Joe’ to explain it to you because in the process of ‘Joe’ having to explain it to you, it’s going to kick it up a level in his brain. It’s going to solidify it in his brain. So, I think a lot of really open conversations about learning and how you learn . . . We’re trying to get them to be a little more metacognitive.

When asked if he has seen improvements in teachers’ instructional strategies, the principal replied, “We had some really, really strong, ‘tough act to follow’ teachers when I got here, and we have hit some homeruns with some teachers.” He further described one teacher as
unbelievable [with] planning and curriculum. She’s the gold standard . . . I asked
students recently what it is about that teacher’s class . . . and the kids say, ‘She has a plan.
She knows where she’s going. It’s not just week to week. She’s months ahead of us in
terms of where this is all going.’ And they know that . . . [Students say], ‘It would be
insulting . . . to her and the rest of the class [for me to] . . . come to class [un]prepared.’

According to one teacher, historically the school principals have been “pretty hands off in
terms of the roles of the essential areas of the departments and the individuals in terms of
crafting their own curriculum and instruction.”

Another teacher stated,

[The principal] doesn’t have to do that many observations [of me]. He tends to do more
popping in and out, you know like the quick ten minute vignettes. It’s really normal for
people to be walking in and out of our classes. It doesn’t faze us. Sometimes he walks in
or [a person from the board building] will walk in and sit down for a couple of minutes,
hang out, and then walk out. So, sometimes it’s stuff on the fly, like, ‘That was really
cool,’ or . . . ‘That sounds [like] really neat stuff.’

Another teacher at the school reflected on instructional guidance from the principal

stating,

He’s given me feedback based on observations. He’s been real supportive as far as
seeing how I structure a lesson; how I communicate with students . . . He’s given me a lot
of feedback and a lot of encouragement. [There was] a lot of change when I moved here;
it is a very different model. Again, trying to make learning student-centered, I’m doing
more coaching than instructing. So, I provide learning opportunities and then step back
and help them as they run with it . . . [The principal has] really supported me in
modifying my curriculum that way . . . More and more it’s students are doing things . . .
You’re not going to see me stand in front of the class more than five minutes at a time,
like leading a discussion.

While there have been improvements in this teacher’s instructional strategies, this teacher
also believes in some ways they have
deteriorated . . . [In a previous school] I used to have my one classroom with my one
desk, and all my students came to me and there was one class . . . It was this nice, neat,
orderly thing . . . But now I teach in sometimes seven different rooms in a day, and I
don’t have a lot of control over those rooms, and it’s hard to provide all that level of
structure when I’m moving around so much. So, because this is a small school, because
we don’t have equal rooms per teacher . . . there are items in my bag of tricks that I haven’t used in a while.

Without traditional grades or exams, the superintendent was asked how he assesses student learning. He stated, “Rich portfolios demonstrating . . . students’ understanding [of] the concepts. Graduation by exhibition. I like for young people to show what they know . . . I’m expecting to see that hands-on approach to demonstration of what they know versus what I may be expecting of the test score in other situations.”

One teacher further explained, “Every student is measured against themselves. They’re not trying to score a certain number . . . [They receive] narrative evaluations . . . They get paragraphs about their progress, so we’re looking to see has everyone improved? Is everyone trying real hard? Is everyone stretched past their comfort zone? . . . If they want to meet criteria they have to strive.”

This teacher provides a rubric for each project outlining expectations for students based on a scale from one to four. The rubric outlines the “qualities I want to see in the work . . . I want this level of detail. I want this level of perfection in the grammar, the mechanics. I want to see this level of revision.” This teacher further explained, “A three [means] they’ve met expectations, a four means they’ve gone above expectations. A two means they are approaching and a one means they are kind of far from it. For me, that’s as far as I go [with grades].” In order to advance, students must achieve at least a level three, indicating expectations have been met.

To ensure that each student is being challenged intellectually, this teacher explained, “I’m going to design assignments so that there’s enough flexibility so each student can get something out of it . . . Every student will get different feedback. If a student is still working on basic
mechanics, they’re going to have very different comments on their paper than someone who has
got that down. That second group might get more feedback on their critical thinking,
paragraphing, whatever the certain skill they are trying to master.”

Another teacher added that the appropriate level of academic challenge, “depends on who
the kid is, and . . . for me personally that is an area that has really shifted . . . Somewhere along
the way I just realized that it was just OK that not everybody was doing the same things at the
same time or was going to end the year at the same place. But, I really had to find what each
individual person’s place was. And sometimes it meant throwing out some extra tough stuff in
that direction and pulling back a little in this direction.”

This teacher further stated that, “Sometimes I’m thinking . . . maybe [I’m] pushing too
hard, but I feel like I have such a strong connection to some of these kids that . . . if I push too
hard I can still recover. I can still pull them back because I can reach them on this personal
connection level.”

One teacher explained that it isn’t challenging to keep an individual student perspective
because I only have a certain number each semester . . . Right now I have sixty students
in my classes . . . Because I’m coaching instead of instructing a lot of the time, I’m able
to work one-on-one to really get to know them. Plus, there are some kids I’ve had in the
class for five, six times, so . . . I already have established communication with their
parents. I already know about their skills and their shortcomings. I know how to push
their buttons. I know what their interests are so I can make small talk, to calm them
down. So . . . the school is smaller because of the relationships, I think.

This teacher further stated, “the nice thing is we have seven years with them, so over the
course of seven years we learn them, and they learn us . . . There’s a lot of potential for growth
because it’s like a family. They have the same teacher over and over again, so we have the
ability to coach them and help inch them forward toward something.”
School B Summary

As a democratically run school, all students, all staff, and to a lesser degree parents actively share in the leadership and responsibilities for School B. The principal’s role as “keeper of the flame,” is to promote the school’s alternative philosophy of education and protect the school’s foundational tenets by resisting the pull to be more traditional.

The superintendent, who is philosophically aligned with Alternative School B, understands the competing interests of his role as the district leader to promote systems with a shared vision and goals, and the alternative school principal’s role to promote individuality with a focus on being unique. The superintendent’s role is to engage in ongoing communication with the principal to create and maintain a common vision for the school and to promote and support the value of the school’s alternative philosophy in the community.

School B puts considerable emphasis on partnering with parents/caregivers to manage their student’s academic progress. This is evident with structured, in-depth meetings 2-3 times annually with every parent/caregiver, student, and family group leader (teacher) collectively discussing the student’s academic progress and making future goals and plans together.

Connections are made with the community by offering use of their facilities and coordinating opportunities for students to perform extensive community service. The school’s ties with the community are further strengthened through individuals and organizations that provide educational resources to teachers and partner with the school to help students who are going through a difficult time personally.

A sense of community at the school is created through weekly all school meetings when all staff members and students gather to discuss school happenings. The school community is
strengthened by the limited mobility of principals, teachers, and students. When the founding principal retired after almost thirty years, the average tenure of the teaching staff was over 18 years. Most students enter the school in grade 6 and there is very little attrition through grade 12. This stability strengthens the school culture and creates increased opportunities for relationships to form and trust to be built, as well as programs to be developed and strengthened over time.

The school community is also distinguished as a “community of learners” where teachers learn from one another—creating a true professional learning community, and serve as facilitators of learning within their individual classrooms, allowing students to learn from one another. Within the school there is an emphasis on deep, critical thinking and learning. Students are taught to identify bias, and to regularly engage in personal reflection of their learning and growth.

School B is structured so that every student is “known” very well, both personally and academically, by at least one adult in the school. This is accomplished by maintaining a small school size and creating family groups of no more than 15 students and a teacher who spend designated time together each week. This helps create a safe environment, and creates opportunities for teachers to more effectively work with students to achieve their best.

Individual teachers in School B have flexibility to develop their own courses and curriculum within the parameters outlined by the NYSED and the school’s graduation requirements. School-wide curriculum alignment between departments is limited, and some departments are more aligned between grades than others. But, School B has developed extensive guidelines for graduation by exhibition, and school-wide expectations for portfolios and demonstrations of learning.
Chapter 6: Cross Case Analysis & Interpretation of Findings

In-depth case studies of the leadership and organizational characteristics of School A and School B provided rich data, as outlined in the previous two chapters, for comparative analyses between these two different types of schools and additional insights into how they compare with research on other educational provisions.

Comparison of Communities

Both School A and School B are located in small cities. While similar in many ways, a further examination of the demographics of each community identified several differences. Community B has a more diverse population than Community A, and more than twice the percentage of adults receiving a bachelor’s degree. The home ownership rate of Community B is half that of Community A, and it has a much lower median household income in comparison to Community A. Subsequently, the percentage of residents in Community B living below the poverty level is two and a half times greater than in Community A.

It seems reasonable to suggest that the higher education rate, combined with the lower home ownership rate and lower income level in Community B could be partly explained by the higher number of college students living in the community.

Comparison of School Districts

School District A and School District B have similar demographics—both enrolling approximately 5,000 students in grades K-12, both designated as Average Need/Resource Capacity by the New York State Education Department (NYSED), and approximately 35% of students in both districts are eligible for free or reduced price lunch.
Comparison of Alternative School Demographics

Creation & Mission

Even though their district demographics are similar, each district identified a different student need, and subsequently created different models of alternative schools.

School District A decided that too many academically capable students were “falling through the cracks” in their traditional schools. With a target population of students ages 16-19 who were considered at-risk of dropping out or who had already dropped out of the traditional schools in the district, school personnel and community members developed alternative School A with the goal of reconnecting students and a focus on developing academic, social, and vocational skills.

School B was established by the district’s Board of Education (almost 30 years before School A) to provide an alternative option for students in grades 6-12 who were seeking a nontraditional learning environment focused on developing skills needed to become global citizens.

Entrance & Exit Requirements

Both School A and School B are schools of choice—school leaders, teachers, students (parents) are all members by choice. Students are referred to School A and complete an application and interview process with acceptance based on “fit and readiness,” meaning the interview committee believes the students will be successful at the school—they are disconnected, but not lost. Acceptance to School B is based on a lottery, with primary entrance at 6th grade. Of importance, both schools are at capacity with more students applying annually than are able to attend—either due to limited enrollment or perceived lack of “fit” (School A).
Both School A and School B abide by the NYSED traditional requirements for graduation, with the exception that School B has received Regents exam waivers in all subjects except English. In addition to NYSED and their respective district graduation requirements, both schools require community service and a final capstone portfolio and demonstration of learning. In keeping with their distinct missions, School A has a mandatory work component and requires 100% school attendance. School B’s additional formal requirements include career explorations, participation in alternative community court or mediation, and a team interdisciplinary project.

Student Mobility

Unlike many alternative schools where students return to their traditional school after receiving remediation, most students in School A and School B graduate from the alternative schools. Admission to School A occurs three times a year, at the beginning of each trimester. This removes the common curriculum alignment struggles for transferring students and creates a stable student body. The stability of the student body was especially evident in School B where students typically enter in sixth grade and the vast majority stays for seven years until graduation. Low attrition creates an environment where teachers and students (and their parents) know each other very well on an academic and personal level.

Size

Even though students in School A enter much later in high school and spend fewer years at the school, the limited enrollment of 40 students creates a teacher-to-student ratio for the total school population of fewer than one to ten, allowing students and staff significant opportunities to interact and relate. With a maximum enrollment of 300 students, School B maintains a small-school-feel through family groups composed of no more than 15 students and one teacher.
Structure

School A and School B are structured differently—different from each other and from the traditional schools in their districts. Each was intentionally designed to accomplish its unique mission. With an emphasis on developing students’ academic, social, and vocational skills, the mandatory work component of School A is significant, and therefore the school day begins with students working at their jobs in the community; afternoons are designated for classroom learning on-campus. Social skills are developed through ongoing interactions in the small school community, community service projects, out-of-school learning activities, and a daily gathering time when all students and staff gather to connect with each other and with learning. School A also differs from other schools by following a year-round trimester calendar, with graduation occurring three times a year.

In contrast, School B primarily follows its district’s annual calendar, but its daily and weekly structure is quite different—again, reflecting its unique mission. School B schedules significant time each week when students and teachers interact and engage in the democratic processes of running the school—family group time is scheduled forty minutes twice a week, and all school meetings occur once a week when the entire school community meets to discuss and vote on school issues. The school weekly calendar also includes 3-4 periods twice a week when students may choose from a variety of enrichment projects of personal interest, and the annual calendar includes spring trips when students engage in service and learning opportunities.

Schools v. Programs

Of importance to this study, both School A and School B are schools, not alternative programs located within, or under the umbrella of a traditional public school. Each of the schools has its own BEDS code with the NYSED, meaning it is a stand-alone school held solely
accountable for its results. Both School Leader A and Principal B perceive this is important as it contributes to each school’s autonomy and independence. School Leader A stated that being a school makes it less vulnerable to being absorbed into the traditional school during times of financial stress; similarly, Principal B believes being a school gives the school more leeway to stay true to its nontraditional practices as district and state policies shift. The down side of having its own BEDS code was mentioned by Superintendent A who believes at times it has added pressure to School A which is held to the same NYSED accountability standards for graduation rates as traditional schools, even though they have a much different student population.

**Misconceptions**

Participants in both School A and School B mentioned challenges with community misconceptions about their schools. Because these schools are so different from their traditional counterparts, and there are many different definitions and perceptions of “alternative education,” both schools have found it is necessary to continually share, promote, and at times defend their alternative philosophy, culture, and practices.

Though respondents from both districts mentioned the challenge of community misconceptions, the schools differ somewhat in those challenges. Superintendent B stated that at times the alternative school’s philosophy and practices draw criticism from those who believe it is a resource drain and that some of their practices are not appropriate. He stated that these challenges are ongoing and believes the alternative school’s “approach to teaching and learning . . . is going to be challenged by anyone who is stuck in the traditional way of thinking about education.”
In contrast, School A faces community misconceptions (especially when the school was first created) that it is a place where the “bad” kids go, and sometimes even parents struggle with misconceptions. As one teacher stated, “a lot of parents . . . think their child is going to a dumping ground,” but this lack of trust most often changes to support after the parents attend the open house, better understand the school, and begin to see positive changes in their student.

Of importance, School A was created with the goal of establishing an exemplar program. School Leader A stated, “This wasn’t ever just a place that said, ‘let’s figure out how we can crank out more diplomas.’ It was never a place where we . . . ever considered being a dumping ground.” Some of the structures put in place to prevent this from happening include a focus on whole student development with high expectations, guidelines outlining a specific purpose of the school, and specific target population of students, and then incorporating an application and interview process to select students who will most likely be successful in the school. An interview committee of school personnel, students, and community members has the final say on whether students are admitted to the school. This is unlike other alternatives where students are “placed” in the alternative school by their “feeder” school.

*Choice Membership with Emphasis on “Fit”*

When these schools were created, significant time and effort was put into researching best practices, developing each school’s philosophy, and creating structures that would reflect and achieve their individual missions. Both schools understood the importance of choice membership for everyone—school leaders/principals, teachers, and students (and their parents) in order to have buy-in and commitment to the school. Because of their unique nature and nontraditional practices, participants in both schools also emphasized the importance of “fit,” meaning that individuals in each of these stakeholder groups needed to fully understand and
embrace the nontraditional philosophy and culture of their school, and the expectation of their individual role within that culture, in order to be successful.

All participants in this study expressed either explicitly or implicitly that this is where they “belong,” where they “fit.” It seems this is an essential element for these nontraditional schools of choice—essential for sustaining the school’s philosophy and culture, and essential for the ongoing commitment of individuals within each stakeholder group.

**Philosophy Formation—Foundational Tenets**

The foundational tenets created by each school continue to be prominently displayed on their walls and referred to regularly. These foundational tenets outline each school’s philosophy—what they believe and value, and provide a way for school personnel to communicate how their schools are different from traditional and other alternative provisions. Not only do they keep each school grounded in its original purpose and intent, the tenets guide decision-making, and serve as an internal measure for effectiveness—“Are we doing what we set out to do?”

**Similarities through the Lens of Raywid**

As previously outlined in the Literature Review, Raywid’s typology of Type I, II, III schools was further distinguished by schools having a primary philosophical focus on “fixing the student” or “fixing the school.” I proposed expanding the typology to whether the school’s philosophy and culture had a primary “focus on development” or a primary “focus on prevention.” Both School A and School B would be considered schools focused primarily on development with a theory of change most closely aligned with “fixing the school” as manifested by their nontraditional contexts, structures, processes and procedures.
Innovative Start-Ups, Not Reform

Being created as nontraditional, innovative schools of choice distinguishes these schools from other “school reform” efforts typically studied (e.g. Bryk et al. 2010) where an existing school’s philosophy and/or culture is being changed or reformed to improve effectiveness. Both School A and School B were created as new school structures and therefore require us to look at them with a slightly different lens with regard to leadership, understanding their unique philosophy and culture, as well as sustainability challenges.

Comparison of Leadership Characteristics

The Superintendents

It was evident that both superintendents not only appreciate and value their alternative schools, they believe they are needed in their districts. Their personal philosophies of education align with their school’s philosophy and culture, and both superintendents expressed pride in the accomplishments of their alternative schools. This philosophical alignment and grounded belief in the school’s culture appears to be uniquely critical for these alternative schools—an essential support for survival.

While literature on traditional schools continues to examine the role and influence of school superintendents, it was evident that superintendents play a critical role in both School A and School B as they have primary influence over sustaining funding, and significant influence over sustaining the culture of the schools. Both School A and School B have faced times of financial stress when they could have been placed within the traditional school setting to save funds or cut entirely from the school district’s budget, ultimately closing the school.
Both superintendents not only allow their school’s “alternativeness,” they expect them to do things differently. They expect the principals/leaders to push or challenge traditional philosophies and practices, to experiment with innovation. They verbally support their schools in public and provide the school principals/leaders with confidence they are on the same page philosophically. Both superintendents work with the alternative school leaders to develop ways to keep their independent and unique nature while abiding by state and district policies.

Data collected for this study suggest that this philosophical alignment is an important aspect for replacing fear with trust. It offers the schools flexibility for innovation and “thinking outside the box” which are necessary to incorporate nontraditional practices that better meet the needs of their unique student populations and the unique missions of their schools. It is difficult to imagine what these schools would look like without this “trusting” support from their superintendents.

While both schools are afforded significant flexibility to be innovative and unique, they are not given complete autonomy and are not independent of their districts or the NYSED. The superintendents provide oversight and accountability, ensuring their alternative school’s work is consistent with the mission and vision of the rest of the district and within the guidelines of the NYSED.

The independent nature of each of these schools, combined with the physical distance created by both being located in buildings separate from other schools in their districts, at times creates challenges for the superintendents to keep the schools connected to the rest of the district. Superintendent A and Superintendent B take different approaches to addressing these challenges. The chain of command and communication between Superintendent A and the school leader is
informal, consisting mostly of the school leader stopping by the superintendent’s office to keep him up-to-date or make requests. The superintendent was clear to say that his relaxed oversight is due to trust between him and the school leader based on philosophical alignment and years of successfully working together. The superintendent also stated that when there is a future transition in school leader, he will provide more oversight and will become a greater physical presence on the campus.

The part-time principal of School A, who is located off-campus, also stated that he would like to spend more time on the alternative school campus. However, I did not get the sense that the principal wanted to spend more time at the school to provide greater oversight and leadership, but rather for his own professional development and to provide more support to the staff and students.

In contrast, Superintendent B believes that part of his role is to keep the alternative school connected to the rest of the district. The principal of School B is included in district administrative meetings, and the superintendent makes regular visits to the school.

These differences in superintendents’ practices may be partly due to different leadership styles, but there are also different dynamics in the districts between the superintendents and the leader/principals of the different schools. In District A, the superintendent, principal, and school leader have worked together for many years and have a shared philosophy of education, based on the importance of developing a positive relationship with each student. They seem to feel comfortable with informal communication and relaxed oversight because they know each other very well, and they trust each other, and I would add that success plays a large part in allowing that trust to remain strong.
In slight contrast, in District B, the superintendent is somewhat new to the district (3 years) and although both he and the principal respect each other and align philosophically, it appears ongoing, regular communication is needed to ensure they remain on the same page and the school is connected to the rest of the district. Another interesting aspect specific to District B is that part of Principal B’s role is to continually challenge traditional philosophies. This is expected, and highly regarded, by both the superintendent and teachers in School B.

_Differing Philosophies on Connecting Alternative & Traditional Schools_

The superintendents also differed on whether they try to strike a balance between district-wide commonalities and their alternative school’s need to view their school as unique. Superintendent A replied, “No. It’s a separate, stand-alone program that works well because of the people and their instincts with working with kids . . . We’re not going to ever make them like the rest of our buildings. They wouldn’t be as successful if we did that.” In contrast, Superintendent B replied, “All the time” and shared an interesting insight into the natural tension between the alternative school principal’s primary focus on individuality and being unique, and the superintendent’s primary focus on creating a system. The competing goals they both primarily cater to—individuality versus systems—require them to work toward common ground, meeting in the middle.

_Effectiveness & Accountability_

Both schools are considered “effective” for this study based on the label of _In Good Standing_ from the NYSED with regard to graduation rates, and neither superintendent expressed any concerns about their school’s success or effectiveness. Both superintendents monitor student attendance and graduation rates, and unique to these schools of choice, they monitor the number of new students interested in attending. They both stated that they have different expectations of
their alternative schools compared with traditional schools in the districts. For example, in School A, the superintendent does not have discussions about how many students the school leader expects to pass the Regents exams—whereas that is a regular discussion with traditional school leaders. The superintendent is more concerned with whether students and staff in School A are establishing positive relationships and whether students are working at their jobs, attending classes, and making positive connections for their futures. He believes the unique population of at-risk students with significant, individualized needs, requires the primary goal of School A to connect students with an employer or college. It should be noted here that there was a sense that School A’s Regents exam passing rate (which is higher than the traditional schools in the district) provides evidence of the school’s success and validity of its “academic rigor.”

Similarly, Superintendent B has different accountability standards for his alternative school than traditional schools in the district. He stated that instead of using test scores to measure the success of School B, he uses portfolios or exhibitions of student learning, the level of engagement he sees with students and staff in the school, and engagement with the district and alumni, and from the community. He made an interesting distinction between “engagement versus strategic compliance,” and questioned whether academic rigor was identified as more work, or more thinking. He believes that currently there is more thinking and engagement taking place in the alternative school than other areas in the district. He also measures the success of School B by what he calls the “intellectual swagger” of students and their ability to ask thought-provoking questions in any setting.

At a time in education policy history when there is a push for increased accountability and oversight, and emphasis on standardized testing and data-driven decision-making, it is
remarkable that both of these superintendents are comfortable with, and allow for, nontangible measures of effectiveness.

Superintendents have Different Expectations of Alternative School leaders

Not only do both superintendents measure the success of their alternative schools differently than their traditional schools, both superintendents also stated they look for a different type of leader. To fill the role of part-time principal of School A, Superintendent A looks for a traditional school assistant principal who appreciates the alternative school staff’s out-of-the-box way of thinking and is “the furthest thing from traditional. I would never put an old school administrator with them.” He also looks for someone who is naturally able to relate well with students.

The principal plays an important role in the administration of School A, but the superintendent stated the school leader is the one responsible for the day-to-day operations of the school and its overall success, and believes the current school leader is effective because of his belief in “the power of the relationship.” This aligns with the superintendent’s strong personal belief as an educator that “the relationship will help get any kid through if you put the time in.”

Similarly, Superintendent B believes School B requires a different type of leader—one who is able to build relationships and build community. “Community is important everywhere, but community and buy-in, and appreciation, and understanding, [are] much more important at [the alternative school].” Different from School A’s leaders, Superintendent B believes that the principal of School B has been successful because he challenged and questioned everything—offering an alternative perspective or thought, and the superintendent stated that he expects the principal of school B to “push and to push back, not be as compliant.”
Both superintendents expect their principals to think differently, innovate, and maintain the philosophy and culture of their nontraditional schools. Of special interest, neither superintendent stressed the importance of the school leaders being instructional leaders—rather, both put an emphasis on being relational, innovative, and upholding their schools’ nontraditional philosophies and practices—focused on whole student development with high expectations in an individual student-centered environment.

School Leadership Dynamics

School A and School B have different leadership structures. School A has a part-time principal, located off-campus and a full-time teacher who assumes the role of school leader on-campus. School A’s principal is a full-time assistant principal at a traditional high school in the district (a feeder school to School A) and with the full-time pressures of the traditional school devotes about 10% of his time to overseeing School A. He is the eighth assistant principal to serve as principal of the alternative school and has served in this capacity for two years. Principal A’s primary role is to conduct teacher evaluations and perform administrative duties related to district and NYSED requirements.

School Leader A was involved in the school’s creation and served as one of the four original teachers. He added the role of school leader to his teaching duties after the original school leader retired.

In contrast, School B has a full-time principal and a part-time assistant principal who helps with teacher evaluations. The current principal succeeded the founding principal who served in that capacity for over 25 years.
Shared Leadership

The leadership structure of both School A and School B at the school level is mostly flat, and operational responsibilities are shared between the principal/school leader, all teachers (regardless of tenure or position), and in School B, all students.

In School A, the school leader serves as a liaison with district administration, makes connections within the community, and is most commonly described as the visionary who keeps the school on track and grounded in its original intent and purposes.

With the primary goal to develop global citizens, School B is structured as a shared democracy between the principal, all students, and all staff. The principal is responsible for administrative duties including teacher evaluations and distributing time among the many part-time teachers, and has sole authority limited to decisions related to immediate health and safety concerns and severe disciplinary issues. All other decisions are made democratically with policy changes sent through the democratic processes of the school and voted on by all teachers and all students. Parents have limited opportunities to participate in the school leadership process as a member of the school’s site-based council.

Of significance, both schools have organizational structures and processes in place that reinforce and maintain their cultures of shared leadership. In School A, the principal, the one with formal authority over the teachers is not located on campus full-time. This organizational structure creates an atmosphere of being “equal” and maintains the shared leadership culture of the school. Furthermore, all teachers meet once a week to collectively discuss each student and address school issues, and a gathering time is part of the structure of every school day when all students and all staff meet to discuss school happenings, ideas, and concerns.
In slight contrast, School B’s foundational tenets of democracy and extensive by-laws of the school outline detailed procedures for how decisions are made. Every member of the school, all students, all staff members and the principal actively participate in shared democracy through weekly all school meetings. Any changes to the bylaws or structure must be approved democratically by this “community”—thereby continually promoting, protecting, and supporting the shared leadership culture of the school.

**Teachers’ Perceptions—Role of the Principal/School leader**

While teachers in both schools struggled at times to differentiate their role from that of their principal/school leader, one significant finding in both schools was that teachers believe their leaders protect, promote, and defend their school’s foundational tenets by being the “visionary” or “keeper of the flame”—keeping the school grounded in its original intent, and establishing and maintaining positive relationships with the district and the larger community.

Specific to School B, teachers believed that the principal’s role also included challenging traditional philosophies within the district and the community. Teachers perceived this leadership as a sign of deep, unwavering commitment to the school’s mission and philosophy to be alternative.

**School Leaders’ Perceptions of Their Roles**

When the two school leaders were asked to describe their roles, they gave slightly different responses. The leader of School A believes his job is to stay engaged and connected to the students, teachers, the district, employers in the community, and funders. If he is able to maintain these “mutually satisfying arrangements,” they will continue “to come back” and “it’s going to keep working.” The school leader further stated that “flexibility, compassion, and high
"expectations,” with everyone across the board is important for his and the school’s success. In keeping with this leadership style, the school leader measures the success of the school beyond graduation rates. Even if students drop out of the school, he believes that is not a failure because, “they came here, they benefitted, they were engaged, they established connections. That still happened.”

School B’s principal believes his role is “keeper of the flame” and is responsible to protect the foundational tenets of the school, including its democratic principles—even when democracy is “painfully slow.” The principal further believes that his biggest responsibility is working with the site-based council to hire the right teachers.

According to Bryk et al.’s (2010) framework of the Five Essential Supports, Leadership was found to be the “driver for change.” However, the schools in this dissertation study had a very different leadership model—a shared leadership structure at such a level that teachers in both schools struggled throughout the interviews to differentiate their leader’s role from their own in many of the other four Essential Elements.

This level of shared leadership is quite profound, for two primary reasons. First, it includes all teachers, and in School B it formally includes all students. Typically, shared leadership is exercised with a few representatives (department heads), not every person in the school community. Second, the typical caveats of shared leadership weren’t mentioned. According to Dimmock (2012, 31), there are oftentimes two potential struggles for distributed leadership, “Principals, for example, feel they are ultimately accountable for everything that happens in the school, and worry that distributing leadership makes it more difficult for them to
maintain control and responsibility. Some teachers, too, raise questions about assuming more leadership responsibility without commensurate increase in their rewards or status.”

Neither of these two cited potential caveats was mentioned in this study. None of the school leaders/principals mentioned feeling alone in their leadership responsibilities, or being ultimately accountable, or wanting to maintain control and responsibility. Perhaps this is due to the trust they feel with their superintendents and teachers. Or, perhaps the shared leadership culture of each of these schools is so strong that the school leaders don’t feel this typical vulnerability and subsequent natural reaction to control.

Equally interesting was that even though teachers in both schools mentioned the significant amount of extra work they do as part of the cultural expectations of their schools, none of the teachers mentioned a desire for more pay or increased “rewards or status.” Perhaps Dimmock’s (2012) caveats of distributed leadership are the result of distributed leadership in the absence of personal alignment with the philosophy and culture of the school, and a lack of trust among and between stakeholders.

**Teachers’ Capacity & Commitment**

Teachers at both schools are there by choice—they are not assigned. Choice membership appears to be an essential element for both School A and School B. A review of literature of other alternative schools indicated that alternative school teachers are sometimes assigned or placed, drawing similarities to the schools being “dumping grounds” for unwanted students and unsuccessful teachers. This was not the case with either School A or School B. In fact, participants of both schools expressed high regard for the capacity and commitment of the teachers, and spoke of being in “awe” of each other’s talents and abilities. These are important
and distinguishing features that both of these schools have in common, and appear to be a significant part of the relational trust, and development of a healthy professional learning community. Choice membership also emphasizes the importance of “fit” within each school and the importance of “hiring right”—meaning teachers understand and buy-into the school’s philosophy and culture and possess the necessary expertise to be successful.

**Expertise—Student-Centered**

Teachers and administrators in both School A and School B stressed the importance of being student-centered, but it seems to be manifested in a somewhat nontraditional way. For example, leaders in both schools emphasized the importance of teacher-student relationships, but the expectation is greater than knowing students by name and being friendly to them. In these schools, the expectation is that every student is “known” very well by at least one teacher. Teachers develop relationships with students based on respect for them as an individual, and high expectations for personal and academic growth—challenging students and supporting them to achieve their best. As the principal of School B stated, it can’t be “disingenuous” in the way teachers show students respect.

Teachers in both School A and School B are expected to learn *each* student’s strengths, weaknesses, learning styles, and tailor their curriculum and instructional techniques accordingly so that each student is challenged. Furthermore, teachers in both schools are expected to provide individualized feedback to students, oftentimes in narrative form, and continue to challenge students until a level of mastery is achieved.
Content Expertise & Flexibility

In addition to being individual student-centered in their approach, teachers possess expertise in their content area and a solid knowledge of their subject. Part of the culture of both School A and School B is to provide teachers flexibility to develop their own curriculum and instructional techniques; in School B this flexibility extends to giving teachers the opportunity to design their own courses. Because of this, teachers are teaching from their passion, their expertise.

The principal of each school is responsible for teacher evaluations, including observations and reviewing curriculum to ensure it is within the boundaries set by state and district guidelines. Principals in both schools expect teachers to engage in nontraditional instructional practices, but teachers acknowledged that Regents classes in School A tend to be more structured with lecture-style instruction and a curriculum that prepares students for the exam.

Allowing teachers flexibility in their curriculum and instruction empowers them as professionals, shows a level of trust in their professional abilities, and perhaps equally important, it allows teachers to tweak curriculum and instruction based on individual student needs and interests. This was emphasized more at School A with students entering and exiting the school three times a year, and where flexibility is especially necessary to meet individual at-risk student needs, which are diverse and ever-changing.

Teachers’ Commitment

The agreed upon and accepted culture of both School A and School B is that teachers “do more” than is typically expected, and have extra responsibilities outside their regular teaching
duties (e.g. collecting timesheets from area businesses in School A; serving as family group leader and participating in extensive meetings with parents in School B). Teachers in both schools also have more preparations for courses. Unlike traditional schools where teachers oftentimes teach more than one class of the same course, teachers in both alternative schools have many different courses and classes they teach and prepare for daily. In addition to multiple course preparations, teachers in both schools cater to the individuality of students, as teachers manage different student learning abilities and styles, different strengths and weaknesses, and working at different paces. Teachers also evaluate learning through individualized narratives (not by number grade) for each student based on their individual goals, and since both schools require at least 85% mastery before any assignment is considered complete, teachers oftentimes need to spend additional time working with students.

This willingness to do more than expected draws some comparisons to the commitment expressed by Fink (2000, 20) who stated that while reflecting on his time as a Department Chair and as one of the original staff members of an innovative school, he realized, “My life lacked balance, but I did not see it at the time because I had finally arrived in a situation that was congruent with my values and beliefs about education and the treatment of people. I was totally, almost obsessively, involved.” While this dissertation study did not specifically ask teachers why they were willing to do more than traditionally expected, similar to Fink (2000), all school participants expressed alignment with their school’s values and beliefs and were committed to their school’s demanding culture. Of importance, many of the teachers and leaders in the study mentioned a heavy workload and extra responsibilities, but these were not mandated from “above;” none of the participants indicated that they were assigned responsibilities outside their regular teaching duties, but rather, “we all work together” to get the job done, and “this is a
community” where responsibility is accepted based on interests, ability, and time. As one teacher in School B stated, “you have to be committed” to work here.

It seems important to distinguish between the freedom and flexibility offered to teachers in both School A and School B and what Bryk et al. (2010, 2) discovered in their study of school reform efforts in Chicago, “Some teachers were quite good, but many others were deeply entrenched in their old ways of doing things, even though their students were obviously not learning. In general, teachers were left to ‘do their own thing’ in their classrooms regardless of the ultimate results.” This freedom to “do their own thing” is quite different from what was found in School A and School B. In these schools, teachers are afforded flexibility based on the established culture of each school, respect for their expertise, and reinforced by their successful record—either graduation rates, Regents exam scores, portfolios of learning, or other measures used by the administration.

Findings from this dissertation study also differed from the similar study conducted by Lisy-Macan (2012) of traditional elementary and middle schools in New York State. The principals in her study “indicated that there is a great deal of teacher stress within their building” due to the NYSED policies and accountability requirements. Some teachers “do not believe they can accomplish all that is being required of them. They also stated that many of the teachers view the requirements as punishment mechanisms” (Lisy-Macan 2012, 232). This was quite different from participants in this study who indicated stress, but rarely was it connected with the NYSED. Teachers primarily expressed a heavy workload as a result of expectations from the agreed-upon/committed-to culture of the school. This indicates that perhaps there is a difference in motivation and levels of stress when one is overwhelmed by things they choose and believe
are necessary or valued, than being overwhelmed with demands with which one does not value or align.

**Instructional Guidance**

The expectation of teachers in both School A and School B is that they be innovative and student-centered in their curriculum and instruction. Teachers in both schools focus on understanding (and helping students understand their own) learning styles, interests, areas of strengths and areas in need of improvement. Textbooks are not used in either school, and teachers rarely use lecture style instruction (except for Regents classes in School A). Instead, Superintendent A described it as “inquiry-based instruction, heavy discussion.” In School B, the principal expects student-led classrooms where the teachers are facilitators. A teacher further described her classroom as, “a community of learners.”

Veteran teachers in both schools stated that they receive very little instructional guidance from their principals/school leaders. However, newer teachers in both schools stated that they relied on their school leader/principal for guidance to improve their curriculum and instructional strategies. In general, teachers in both schools mentioned that they work primarily with their colleagues to help them improve their overall instruction or make recommendations in their work with individual students.

**Professional Learning Communities**

Teachers and school leaders in both School A and School B described feeling a sense of community within their individual schools. They primarily rely on each other for instructional support, problem solving, and generally appreciate and value each other’s contributions, creating true *professional learning communities*. Neither teachers from School A nor School B regularly
participate in professional development activities at the traditional schools in their districts. This is due in part to the location of both schools on separate campuses from their traditional counterparts, different types of professional development needs, and School A has year-round scheduling and daily classroom time from 2:00 p.m.-5:00 p.m. that conflicts with times when the traditional schools are providing their professional development activities.

Curriculum Alignment

In School A, in part because there is only one teacher per subject, there is no formal curriculum alignment, they do not use textbooks, and there is very limited coordination of curriculum with the traditional schools in the district (limited collaboration does exist however with regard to Regents classes). Teachers in both schools work within the NYSED and their individual district guidelines for curriculum, but they are allowed flexibility. School B, while larger with multiple teachers in each subject area, also has a less formal culture for curriculum alignment, allowing individual departments to develop their own level of alignment and individual teachers the flexibility to develop their own curriculum within each department. The school’s graduation by exhibition guidelines provide common school-wide expectations and general standards for portfolios, but there is flexibility within those guidelines resulting in some departments being more formally aligned than others. Two specific challenges were expressed in this regard: whether curriculum school-wide was being driven by the graduation by exhibition guidelines or whether individual teachers’ curricula were “falling within” the guidelines, and, with limited curriculum alignment in some departments there was a perceived need to ensure all learning objectives were covered as students progressed through high school.

This level of flexibility afforded to teachers in both School A and School B differs significantly from Lisy-Macan’s (2012) findings. In her similar study of traditional elementary
and middle schools, teachers wanted to be respected as professionals and wanted more autonomy with regard to their classroom practices—curriculum and instruction. A perceived lack of autonomy formed a tension between principals pushing data collection and teachers responding with, “‘That is not why I became a teacher’” (Lisy-Macan 2012, 248).

*Every Student-Centered Learning Climate*

Leaders from both schools emphasized the importance of developing positive relationships with students. Superintendent A believes that a positive relationship between a teacher and student “will help get any kid through if you put the time in.” Similarly, Principal B stated, “It’s relationship, relationship, relationship.”

Teachers in both schools also emphasized the importance of knowing students on an individual basis in order *to provide the greatest amount of challenge* and to identify student-specific areas in which they are struggling. According to Allensworth and Easton (2007, 40), “school-based relationships develop as teachers and students work together to meet academic goals.” Similarly, Bryk et al.’s (2010, 60) definition for a student-centered learning climate includes academic press and rigor combined with teacher-student relationships showing care and support.

Of special interest, there is a sense in both schools that the teachers and leaders genuinely like spending time with the students and with their colleagues, and close relationships are a large part of the teachers’ job satisfaction. One teacher in School B stated it would be difficult to leave the school and give up the life-long relationships he has developed. The principal of School A stated that he gravitates toward the type of students at School A and believes being
around them more would help him professionally. This is quite different from the often-expressed negative perceptions of at-risk students.

Perhaps the most striking characteristic of a student-centered learning climate, and a similarity found between School A and School B, and yet different from many other schools is that No child is left behind. This is part of the culture of each school, reinforced and supported by organizational structures that include intentionally designating time daily when students and staff interact on a personal level, maintaining a small student-to-teacher ratio, limiting the number of students enrolled, and creating family groups (School B). Everyone is known well by someone. In School A especially, this is quite different from the traditional environment from which these students transferred, where they had “fallen through the cracks” or were “disconnected.”

Deep, Critical Thinking

Both School A and School B emphasize deep learning, and challenge students to think critically about what they are studying. Both schools require students to be aware of and identify biases in what they are reading or hearing, to create portfolios, and to make presentations of learning that describe personal reflections on how they have changed personally as a result of what they have learned.

Whole Student Development with a Focus on Foundational Tenets

Both School A and School B focus on whole student development. This emphasis is outlined in each school’s foundational tenets that declare they are not solely academic institutions, and is continually practiced through scheduled non-academic time. School A’s mission includes the development of vocational and social skills. Time is spent helping students
write resumes, practicing professional presentations, and receiving job skills training and

guidance finding and maintaining employment.

The principal of School B explained his resistance to state testing and his focus on whole
student development stating, “It’s not about whether or not it’s a good test. It’s about the high
stakes nature of it and the dismissing of all the other learning that goes on . . . I’m not anti-test,
I’m anti being myopic and absolute. I think kids deserve to be viewed as holistically as
possible.”

*Emphasis on Student Leadership*

Another important aspect of whole student development found in both School A and
School B is that they empower *all* students to actively engage in its leadership. Every student is
encouraged and expected to “have a voice.” In School A, this is practiced through open
discussions about school activities/policies during a gathering time each day and the expectation
that all students exercise leadership and share in the responsibility for the school by holding one
another accountable to the foundational tenets, with older students mentoring newer students.
School B has a more formal shared leadership structure in place where *every* student is expected
to actively engage in the democratic processes of leading the school by voting on school policies
weekly.

*Parent & Community Ties—Connections & Partnerships*

As schools of choice, both School A and School B establish an initial connection with
parents who choose to enroll their students. Because the schools are different from the more
familiar traditional schools, both School A and School B emphasize the importance of
parent/guardian orientations by meeting with school personnel and attending open house events to better understand the culture, philosophy, practices, and expectations prior to enrollment.

After enrollment, School A and School B take different approaches to parent involvement. School A’s parent involvement is limited mostly to parent (or other student-invited adult) attendance at school events in the community, and “as-needed” phone calls to parents to discuss a student’s progress at the school. According to teachers and the school leader, this limited involvement is due in part to the school’s emphasis on: developing the leadership skills of students by expecting them to take responsibility for their own learning, the age of the student population (16-19), and the understanding that some of the students attending the school do not have a stable, supportive family structure. Adults are regularly invited to attend school events in the community, but, again, students exercise leadership by deciding whom to invite.

Superintendent A made an interesting distinction between “connecting” with parents and how we typically measure parent “involvement.” Due to the challenges associated with their student dropping out of the traditional school, many of the alternative school parents had a difficult relationship with the traditional school. But, the superintendent has seen that shift at the alternative school because parents see the staff show extra care, and they begin to see positive changes in their student. These experiences lead to increased trust and a stronger parent “partnership” or “connection” even though they may not be on campus more.

In Contrast, School B expects ongoing involvement through parent/guardian meetings at least twice a year with their student and family group leader to assess the student’s learning and collectively make future plans. The principal tells parents, “We need you here. We need you to talk about your kids with us and give us insights at the beginning of the year, the middle of the
year, and the end of the year.” There are also limited opportunities for parents to help govern School B by serving on the site-based council.

Community Partnerships

Both School A and School B have relied heavily on community resources to create and sustain their schools. As public schools they have both received taxpayer monies to operate. School A’s per pupil expenditure is slightly higher than other schools in their district, and their costs are quite different from traditional schools. The college where School A is located does not charge for rent, maintenance, or utilities and the school does not have administrative support staff. School funding was originally covered by a federal grant, later sustained by the district, and for the past four years has received funding from a local corporate foundation. In addition to these resources, a local family foundation provides financial support for supplemental educational activities and student wages at local nonprofits, and students and staff raise funds through activities including a school-run business.

In contrast, School B is funded by the school district and operates on the same per pupil expenditure as traditional schools in the district. As with School A, students and staff participate in supplemental fundraising activities to pay for school trips and activities.

Similar to traditional schools, both School A and School B rely on the community for non-academic support when students are struggling personally and the scope is beyond the expertise of school personnel. Both School A and School B also partner with the community for supplemental educational activities including community service to achieve both schools’ missions to help students connect with the larger community in which they belong and instill an understanding that they share in responsibility for that community.
While both School A and School B rely on strong ties with the larger community, School A exhibits a greater reliance on its community ties for funding to sustain the school, location on a local college campus, and important partnerships with employers throughout the community who provide jobs and mentor students to develop their vocational skills. With a primary focus on helping students (re)connect with further education and/or employment, these ties with the college and local community are crucial to achieving their mission.

Schools as Communities

Participants in both schools referred to their schools as communities. One teacher from School B referred to it as a “community of learners,” meaning teachers and students all share responsibility for the collective learning in the classroom and for creating and maintaining a sense of community where everyone has rights and responsibilities. Guided by their individual school foundational tenets, they are communities where individuals are valued, respected, and trusted with responsibility to actively participate—in general leadership and in leading one’s own learning and teaching.

Making Connections

Creating a strong school community and establishing partnerships in the broader community was especially emphasized in School A where their primary goal is to (re)connect disconnected students. Although teachers and the school leader defined connections in very broad terms, it emerged as an essential element for this alternative school working with an at-risk student population. Different types of connections mentioned included: Connections with caring and supportive adults, connections with teaching and learning, connections with individual strengths, and connections with a fresh start.
**Additional Important Themes**

While studying School A and School B through the lens of the *Five Essential Supports* identified by Bryk et al. (2010), additional themes emerged as important and relevant to their success—most prominently the importance of culture, trust, and the significant challenges involved in sustaining innovation.

**Strong, Deep Culture**

Exploration of the leadership and organizational characteristics of School A and School B identified a similar culture, different from traditional schools, and different from many other alternative schools. *All* participants in the study expressed a deep commitment to the culture of the school, with most of the teachers and school leaders stating they couldn’t imagine teaching anywhere else—their alternative school was where they “fit.” The strength of their commitment to the culture was evident in their willingness to go above and beyond what would traditionally be expected of a teacher. For some participants in the study the commitment to the school’s culture was birthed from their involvement in creating the culture, but *all* participants expressed feeling responsibility for the ongoing care and maintenance and protection of the culture.

Each school’s culture is recognized, respected, maintained, and sustained by all levels of stakeholders—(NYSED, district administration (BOE), superintendents, principals/school leaders, teachers, students (and their parents), and community members).

The off-site principal of School A stated that the keeper of the mission, the vision, the driver of the overall school culture and climate is the school leader—partly because he has been there since the beginning. The principal further stated, “that core group that started the school, it
meant the world to them and it still does... I think all of us [principals] have been smart enough... not to change something that has worked, and respect what they have going on.”

When Superintendent B reflected on the school’s success, he described how well the teachers and students talk about each other at graduation and stated, “You will see that people there are truly passionate about what they built and they own what they built as an organization.” The principal of School B believes there’s a “real deep pride of being part of this community and... I think there’s a pretty rich legacy.”

It seems that the culture of each school is deeply imbedded, at least in part due to the long tenure of their teachers and leaders, and those who remain connected to their schools after retirement. This is an example of Superintendent B’s belief that, “once you’re a part of the culture, you’re always a part of the culture.” In School A, two of the four current teachers have been involved since its inception. When the founding principal of School B retired after almost 30 years, the average tenure of staff was over 18 years.

Relational Trust

Without directly asking about it, trust quickly emerged as a common theme in both School A and School B. According to Bryk and Schneider (2003, 44), “Building and maintaining trust depends on repeated social exchanges” promoted by a small school size and a stable school community. As schools of choice, both School A and School B have “voluntary association” at all levels, which creates an initial foundation of trust, built with like-mindedness (commitment to mission/philosophy, common situation, etc.). Ongoing positive interactions deepen trust and reinforce commitment. Evidence of Bryk and Schneider’s (2003) theory of Relational Trust in School A and School B include Respect embedded in the foundational tenets
of both schools, *Personal Regard* in the form of both schools being student-centered and promoting shared leadership with peer support, *Competence* or professional capacity as they develop healthy professional learning communities, and *Personal Integrity* exhibited by individuals’ commitment to the school community.

According to Bryk and Schneider (2002), Relational Trust leads to innovation, commitment to continuing the conversation and working toward improvement, more risk taking, commitment beyond the norm (time and resources), smooth decision-making, and conflict resolution—all of which were perceived in both School A and School B. As a result of their research on Chicago school reform efforts, Bryk et al. (2010, 207) found that, “Some of the most powerful relationships found in our data are associated with the effects of relational trust and how it operates as both lubricant for organizational change and a moral resource for sustaining the hard work of local school improvement. Absent such trust, it is nearly impossible for schools to develop and sustain strength in the essential supports.”

**Vulnerability—Sustaining Philosophy & Culture**

While trust was a common theme in interviews with participants in both schools, there was another underlying theme that emerged—the awareness of vulnerability. Because these schools are nontraditional, and not mandated, they are vulnerable to changes in district and state policies that could significantly shift their school’s culture, or make them vulnerable to budget cuts that would threaten their existence.

As with other innovative schools included in the literature review, School A and School B have each faced times when their schools were in jeopardy of closing or significantly changing. As previously stated, the NYSED and superintendents have primary influence over
policies in support of innovative schools, and superintendents have additional primary influence over the financial support to sustain the schools, but it became evident that the school leader / principal at each school had primary influence over maintaining the philosophy and culture at the school level, also leading to the sustainability of their schools.

It is an important distinction that neither principal/leader was responsible for creating change in their organizations. The “change” was created when the schools were established. These leaders are transformational in *sustaining* the change, keeping the schools’ practices anchored in their foundational tenets and resisting the pull to drift toward more traditional practices or becoming “complacent.” These leaders are promoters and protectors: promoters in the community and the district, and protectors of the culture—the leadership and organizational characteristics within their schools. These leaders serve as “keepers of the flame.”

**Summary**

Part of the purpose of this study was to examine how the *Five Essential Supports* found in successful urban elementary school reform efforts by Bryk et al. (2010) are manifested in effective alternative high schools. From the onset it was expected that due to the different levels of schools being studied (elementary versus high school), there would be differences in parent involvement and student leadership, and both of these were evident, but in an interesting way. Parent involvement was limited in School A (although Superintendent A made an interesting distinction between connection and involvement). However, it was significant in School B, dispelling the theory that it would be less evident than in an elementary school. It was also expected that student participation in school leadership would be more prevalent at the high school level. This was evident in both School A and School B, but the significant level of student leadership by *all* students was a surprising discovery.
Different from Other Reforms

Another important distinction was the difference discovered between the transformational or “change agent” leadership style oftentimes referred to as the optimal with school “reform” efforts and the leadership styles identified in School A and School B. School “reform” typically refers to changing an organization from within, similar to Bryk et al.’s (2010) study of leaders who were trying to transform failing schools. The two schools in this study were not being transformed, but rather the leaders were transformational in their ability to sustain the change—serving as “sustain agents” rather than “change agents.” This is perhaps not as romantic a notion, but still heroic in its own right.

Unique Attributes

School A

With a specific focus on academically capable students who have disconnected from the traditional school environment—for a variety of reasons that are diverse and ever changing—School A has successfully established a philosophy and culture that helps students reconnect with learning. Superintendent A believes School A has “saved lives,” meaning students’ lives have changed trajectory as a result of attending the school—changed from a path of dropping out of high school to a path of graduation and connection to employment and/or further education. District A and School A have been successful at “catching” students at a time when much of the research on at-risk students says it is too late, or very difficult to accomplish.

School B

With a focus on creating global citizens, School B has established a unique philosophy and culture that values every individual—regardless of age, title, or tenure. School B removes
the more typical group dynamics that limit leadership to those who are strong or popular—
replacing it with a culture that says everyone is valuable, everyone is on a level playing field and
is measured according to individual interests and abilities—without competition.

**Similarities Between A & B**

Perhaps the most surprising finding from this dissertation study was that even though
School A and School B are unique and have substantially different student populations and
missions, examining them through the lens of the *Framework of Essential Supports* revealed
similarities in their philosophies and cultures.

Both School A and School B share a common philosophy that every person is known
(academically and personally), and every person matters and is respected—students, teachers,
and leaders. Individuality is not only accepted, it is honored. There is an emphasis on creating a
true “community of learners” in which every person is viewed holistically and expected to
succeed. Every person is expected to take responsibility—individually and collectively for
his/her own development and the betterment of the school community.

Both schools also have a similar culture—their philosophy in action. The common
culture of both schools is based on high expectations—at all levels, with flexibility and support.
The culture of both School A and School B is continually strengthened by the relational trust that
has developed over time based on all members choosing membership to their school and
personal alignment with its philosophy and culture.

*High expectations*—Both School A and School B have cultures where each individual is
expected to “do more” than traditionally expected. Examples include: Teachers are expected to
create their own innovative curriculum and provide individualized instruction and feedback to
students. All teachers and students are expected to actively share in the leadership of the school and maintenance of its culture. Students are expected to achieve 85% mastery on all assignments before they are considered complete, create portfolios to present their learning with explanations of how they have changed as a result of their learning, and take responsibility for their own learning.

Flexibility—Is afforded to teachers and students throughout both School A and School B, and is viewed as a necessary link to individuality. Teachers are afforded flexibility to create a curriculum and develop instructional strategies to best meet the individual needs of current students. Students are given flexibility with individual choice in topics they study, the pace in which they complete their work, and establishment of individual goals.

Support—Comes from each person in the school community being known and valued as an individual. Both schools emphasize a small-school feel in order to maintain the focus on individual students and schedule time for students and teachers to interact in out-of-classroom activities where they are able to further develop positive relationships. Both schools have created a sense of “community” within their schools where teachers and students genuinely like each other, and support each other’s personal and collective success through professional learning communities, and where teachers provide academic and personal support to students who are struggling.
Chapter 7: Summary, Conclusions and Suggestions

Summary of Findings

The purpose of this dissertation study was to develop and present a better understanding of the leadership and organizational characteristics of effective public alternative schools.

The two schools examined in this study were selected from a sub-population of schools that were self-identified as “alternative,” considered effective based on a NYSED rating of In Good Standing, and created by public school districts. The selection criteria identified a somewhat unique type of alternative school operated by effective public school districts that acknowledged their traditional schools were unable to adequately meet the needs of all students. Both school districts created nontraditional schools to fill their identified gaps, with somewhat different orientations: School A was created to reconnect disconnected students; School B was created to provide a nontraditional learning environment focused on developing global citizens.

An important distinction is that these two alternative schools are different from what we typically consider school reform efforts. The schools were created as new school structures, by successful school districts, with the charge to be different from traditional schools. Since the vast majority of students in this country are enrolled in public schools, it appears to be a worthy endeavor to better understand the effective leadership and organizational strategies utilized by public school districts to provide alternative options from within.

From the sub-group of schools meeting the selection criteria, the two schools used for this study were purposefully selected for their similar community and district demographics and yet, as noted, distinctly different alternative school models—one focused on a restricted enrollment of at-risk students who had disconnected from school or dropped out (School A) and
the other focused on offering a nontraditional learning option for a general student population (School B). I anticipated an examination of their leadership and organizational characteristics would reveal two different theories of change and provide interesting insights for comparative analyses. Perhaps the most interesting finding is that, notwithstanding differences in mission, target population, and structure, when examined through the lens of Bryk et al.’s (2010) *Framework of Essential Supports for School Improvement*, both schools were quite similar in philosophy and culture.

*Five Essential Supports*

*Parent & Community Ties and Partnerships*. As schools of choice, partnerships with parents appear to be essential for both School A and School B. However, the expectations for parent involvement differ between the two schools. School A does not have formal expectations that parents will be on campus regularly or be actively engaged with teachers regarding their student’s learning. This could be due in part to the age of students (16-19), location of the school on a college campus, and the school’s emphasis on having students take ownership of their learning. Superintendent A made a distinction between parent “involvement” and “connecting with parents,” stating that he believes strong parent “connections” are frequently formed in School A as a result of perceived increases in the level of trust between parents and the alternative school staff as parents begin to see positive changes in their sons and/or daughters and parents come to believe that school staff provide individual and extra care and respect.

In contrast, School B has formal processes in place to actively engage every parent in guiding his/her student’s learning. Structured, in-depth meetings occur at least twice a year when each student, his/her parent, and the family group leader collectively assess and plan the student’s educational goals.
Further, both schools have built significant *community partnerships* with organizations and businesses. The partnerships support student engagement in community service opportunities, supplemental academic enrichment activities, and other support directed to students who are struggling with nonacademic issues beyond the capacity of the school staff. Perhaps somewhat distinctively, School A has entered into partnerships with local foundations to secure financial support; with businesses to provide jobs for students and mentoring for the development of vocational skills; and with the local college for school space, resources, and student and program assimilation within the college’s culture in many ways.

*Teachers’ Capacity and Commitment.* In both School A and School B, a necessary capacity of teachers was identified as being naturally relational. That is, teachers are described as being able to work well with students and colleagues. Beyond this, teachers manifest capacities of being creative and innovative, possessing a high sense of internal accountability, exhibiting field-specific expertise, and having the ability to independently create curriculum that is relevant, engaging, challenging, and diversified.

With the charge to be innovative, teachers are seen as *comfortable* with risk-taking (e.g. no standardized curriculum) and *willing* to do so. While there are risks associated with teaching in both of these schools, there is also a sense of community, in that teachers are not alone in undertaking work in a nontraditional setting and in nontraditional ways. Both schools function as true professional learning communities where teachers rely on one another for ongoing improvements in curriculum, instruction, and strategies for working with individual students.

It appears that a clear understanding of the unique philosophy and culture of each school, and an intentional match between teachers’ philosophies and skills lies behind the success of these schools. Teachers in both schools implicitly or explicitly conveyed that their motivation
comes from a sense of collective responsibility, rather than external accountability, and from a personal commitment to the unique philosophy and culture of their schools. This is where they “belong.”

*Student-centered Learning Climate.* Both School A and School B were intentionally designed to be *every* student-centered by establishing policies and structures to value the individuality of each student, and to promote a safe and welcoming place. At inception, both schools created foundational tenets or guiding principles outlining individual student rights and responsibilities within the school community. These foundational tenets continue to serve as a daily guide for how the individual and collective actions of students, teachers, and leaders will accomplish the missions of the schools. Both schools put great emphasis on the relationship between teacher and student, shaped by a focus on whole student development that is based on high expectations and support. In order to uphold an individual student-centered focus, both schools maintain a small school size where *every* student is known very well by at least one adult, and students are less likely to disengage or “fall through the cracks.” Complementing the individualized attention each student receives, *every* student is expected to take ownership of his/her learning and to actively engage in the leadership of the school community.

*Instructional Guidance.* The core charge for teachers in both School A and School B is that their curriculum and instruction be student-centered. Teachers support student-centered instruction by knowing *each* student well, both academically (e.g. learning styles, strengths, weaknesses) and personally (e.g. interests). Both schools stress a holistic approach to the respective curricula, in which the basics of core standards that need to be learned are covered alongside additional emphases on critical and analytical thinking (e.g. identifying bias), sharing what has been learned (e.g. presentations of learning, portfolios), and personal reflection (e.g.
how their learning has impacted them). Students have choices in their learning, work at their own pace, receive individualized feedback on their assignments, and are allowed to “move on” when a level of mastery has been achieved (at least 85%). Teachers were referred to as “facilitators of learning” and a classroom as a “community of learners.” With Regents exams as a requirement for graduating from School A, some classes are more structured with lecture-style instruction as the means used to better prepare students for the assessments.

*Leadership.* Leadership at the school level for both School A and B is shared by all teachers and students (School B). The level of shared leadership in both schools is noteworthy. In School B, formal processes are in place for every teacher and every student to participate; all teachers are not only involved in decision-making, but decisions are reached by consensus. Such an approach appears to give emphasis to the importance of every individual, not just the majority. The expectation for participation in leadership creates a collective responsibility for the direction and success of both schools. The principal/leader, in School A as well as School B, was primarily and broadly identified as the “sustainer of change” or “keeper of the flame,” responsible for keeping the schools grounded in their foundational tenets and continually resisting the pull to become more traditional. This role differs from Bryk et al.’s (2010) characterization of the role of the school leader (in urban elementary school reform efforts) as the “driver for change.”

At the district level, both superintendents personally align with the nontraditional philosophy and culture of the alternative schools under their oversight, and support school-level leaders by securing continuation of funding, expecting and supporting nontraditional practices, and working with school leaders to remain unique while meeting broad district and NYSED guidelines.
Additional Themes

Support Services. In addition to teachers, paid staff members on campus in both alternative schools provide non-academic support to students. In School A, with an enrollment restricted to at-risk students, one of the five full-time staff members is a counselor who helps students with a wide range of challenges outside the classroom. This support complements and undergirds community partnerships, previously mentioned, that provide additional non-academic support extending beyond the capacities and reach of the school staff. Due to the small size of these schools, and the emphasis placed in both schools on developing positive relationships with each student, the staff members are intentional about quickly identifying a student in need of additional support and helping to secure the necessary resources. As one teacher in School B stated, support services are provided all the time by everyone.

Alternative School Context. The relationship between the Five Essential Supports and the alternative school context was most clearly revealed in the interviews with superintendents. Both described how the alternative schools within their districts differed from the traditional schools and identified key distinguishing features: a separate location from the traditional high schools, a unique mission/vision, and a particular nontraditional structure. When comparing expectations placed on school leaders and teachers, both superintendents noted that different measures for evaluating effectiveness are used, different characteristics and styles are valued when hiring leaders or teachers, more flexibility is allowed with respect to the curriculum, instruction, and overall governance, and staff are expected to be more innovative and more individual student-centered in approach than would be anticipated in the traditional high school.

Culture. School A and School B have strong, deeply embedded cultures. Both schools were originally established with clear foundational tenets that continue to guide decision making.
and serve as internal measures of effectiveness. The foundational tenets also help communicate the unique philosophy and culture of the school, allowing for an educated choice in membership based on a “match” of personal alignment with the school’s philosophy. Personal alignment with, and commitment to the foundational tenets by school leaders and teachers over time has strengthened and further embedded the culture of these schools. Statements from teachers and leaders indicating that once someone is a part of the culture they are always a part of the culture reveal the commitment and attachment individuals feel for what they have had a part in building.

In contrast to what is reported about other innovative alternative schools that have not been sustained, School B experienced little teacher turnover for the first couple of decades and the founding leader remained in that capacity for over 25 years. The years of dedication and effort of a retained group of staff served to both build and strengthen the school’s culture. Even though School A is just over 10 years old, stability of staff is evident with two of the four current teachers (and district leaders) having been involved in the school since its inception.

**Innovation & Sustainability.** The uniqueness of these schools presents particular challenges and considerable vulnerabilities. As schools of choice, they are vulnerable to continued voluntary membership from students (and their parents), teachers, and leaders. As non-mandated schools, they are vulnerable to funding cuts. As nontraditional schools, they are vulnerable to policy shifts at the district and NYSED levels. As innovative, risk-taking schools, they are vulnerable to a breakdown of relational trust among all stakeholders.

**Relational Trust.** As they described how members of the school community work together to promote effectiveness, school leaders, teachers, and the superintendents referred to “trust.” Relational Trust theory, developed by Bryk and Schneider (2002), provides an additional lens to better understand the characteristics and implications of the trusting
relationships found in both schools. The theory embodies manifestations of and connections between Respect, Competence, Personal Regard for Others, and Personal Integrity.

Both School A and School B have structures and processes in place that provide fertile ground for relational trust to grow and be sustained. Voluntary membership in support of the school’s philosophy and culture creates an initial foundation of trust. In both schools, arrangements and orientations are in place for frequent and in-depth interactions among members of the school community, strengthening trust as community members interact in “expected ways.” It follows that clear statements of the philosophy and culture of the alternative schools incorporating new school structures or models (conveying expectations for each member of the school community) are important.

Staff in both schools elaborated on the manifestations of relational trust within their school community including Respect for each person’s opinion through decision-making by consensus; ongoing professional learning communities in which teachers openly and regularly rely on the Competence of others to improve individual and collective efforts; a Regard for Others through flexibility in scheduling; and the Personal Integrity evidenced by consistent behaviors aligning with and reinforcing the philosophy and culture of the school.

Relational Trust is the keystone for both of the alternative schools in this study. Participants implicitly and explicitly revealed that commitment to the philosophy and culture of the school drives their work and effectiveness. Personal ambition does not figure, or at most is manifested through the commitment to the school. It follows that relational trust, as manifested in these schools, is vulnerable to any shift to the well-established and understood philosophy and culture of the schools. Such changes, whether arising from external policy changes at any level
or from school community members who do not meet expectations under the philosophy and culture of the school, are believed to weaken relational trust. Community members would be less willing to support innovation and accept risk-taking, and so manifest less commitment to the school. Sustainability, under these circumstances, is threatened.

Conclusions

The Framework of Essential Supports (Bryk et al. 2010) provided a useful lens through which the leadership and organizational characteristics of these somewhat unique alternative schools could be understood. Further, due to a limited rigorous knowledge base with clear account taken of different types of alternative education, and in recognition of the limited understanding of the unique, nontraditional nature of such schools, case study methodology was necessary to better understand and describe the characteristics of these schools. As a result, several conclusions emerged.

1. Classification of Alternative Provisions is Needed. The lack of a clear definition or agreed-upon guidelines for alternative education has led to the creation of different types of alternative provisions guided by diverse philosophies and establishing varied practices, including different structures, missions, and target populations. This great diversity, and at times contradiction in philosophies and practices, has proven difficult for researchers, policymakers, and practitioners to identify “what works best for whom.” An ability to better distinguish between different types of provisions would allow for improved understanding of best practices and better guide policymakers and practitioners in their collective efforts. Raywid’s (1994) typology of Type I Schools of Choice, Type II Last Chance programs, and Type III Remediation programs has provided an often-used framework to distinguish among alternative education provisions. However, research has indicated shortcomings of this typology as it is oftentimes
difficult to place schools (and for schools to locate themselves) within a specific category. Raywid’s (1994) broader distinction characterized alternative schools as having one of two primary philosophies: One philosophy is that a student’s behavior or needs are identified as the problem, and the guiding approach is to “fix the student.” The other philosophy is that the school structure stands in the way of student learning, and the guiding approach is to “fix the school” by creating new school structures or processes.

True differences among types of alternative schools arise with respect to philosophy (what they believe) and culture (how they do it). On the basis of this study and building on the extant literature, a useful extension of Raywid’s (1994) typology of public alternative education provisions might be considered. In particular, an extended typology characterizes alternative schools based on their operational orientation, philosophy and culture, and target populations.

I begin this newly expanded categorization with a further distinction between “fix the student” and “fix the school” philosophies according to whether a school is primarily focused on individual student development, or primarily focused on prevention. For example, a school’s general philosophy may be to “fix the school” by incorporating innovative structures or practices. However, it is important to further identify whether the innovations “focus on student development,” (e.g. connecting students with college or training toward living wage employment) or “focus on prevention” (e.g. credit recovery/dropout prevention without a connection to further education or employment).

With this distinction serving as the foundation, I propose the following categorization. Type A provisions are innovative schools of choice open to all students with a philosophy focused on individual student development. Type B schools are similar in that they are
innovative, with a student development-focused philosophy and culture, but their enrollment is restricted to a specific population of students (by choice or mandated). Type C schools are innovative, in that they have a nontraditional philosophy and culture, but they are primarily prevention-focused, incorporating punitive practices to modify behavior, or credit recovery programs offering no particular connection to further education or employment. Lastly, Type D schools are similar to traditional schools in their structure, philosophy, and culture, but they are primarily prevention-focused for a restricted enrollment of students who are oftentimes too disruptive within traditional schools.

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2. *Dual Emphases on High Expectations with Extensive Individualized Academic and Personal Support is the Key to Effectiveness.* Evidence assembled through this study suggests
that effective innovative alternative schools can be described as having an orientation toward “fix the school” with a “focus on student development” through a challenging curriculum, engagement in critical thinking, presentations of learning, and continuation in the learning process until a level of mastery is achieved. In tandem with high expectations, effective alternative schools also manifest individualized, ongoing care and support on a personal and academic level to help each student achieve success during and post-high school. Preliminary evidence suggests that this combination applies whether the alternative school is structured for open or restricted enrollments.

3. Flexibility is Essential for Student-centered Innovative Alternative Schools.

Flexibility lies at the heart of an innovative, student-centered learning climate. Teachers rely on flexibility in their methods of teaching and learning used to engage the diverse learning styles, abilities, and interests of each student. Innovation requires flexibility to experiment and modify approaches that continually strive toward improvement. Nontraditional schools require flexible measures of effectiveness to accurately assess their unique missions, and oftentimes unique student populations.

4. Relational Trust is Essential for the Effectiveness and Sustainability of Innovative Alternative Schools. Alternative provisions are vulnerable to shifts in policies that threaten the unique philosophies and cultures on which they are built and to shifts in funding that threaten their survival as a school. As non-mandated schools of choice, alternative schools depend on the ongoing commitments of students (and their parents) and teachers and school leaders.

Relational trust, built within and between internal and external stakeholders, is essential to overcome common undercurrents that drive toward standardization and, more positively, provide the freedom and flexibility to continually innovate, experiment, and improve. Relational
trust also encourages members of the school community to make long-term commitments that lead to a deeper, shared culture aligned with the philosophy of the school. It is not difficult to imagine how a breakdown of trust within these schools (e.g. between teachers and school leaders) or between these alternative school communities and their district or state-level leaders/partners would undermine continued innovation, healthy professional learning communities, and ultimately, effectiveness. Therefore, there is evidence to suggest Relational Trust is the most essential element for the effectiveness and sustainability of innovative public alternative schools of choice.

5. Choice Membership and “Fit” Cultivate Engagement, Commitment, and Individual and Collective Growth. With foundational tenets clearly stated and in place, choice membership for all members of the school community—students (and their parents), teachers, and leaders—based on personal alignment with, and commitment to the philosophy and culture of the school, stands as an important condition for effectiveness. Members of the school community believe that the alternative school is where they “fit” or “belong” and work in tandem through individual and collective efforts that support and reinforce the mission of the school. It follows that, for alternative schools serving at-risk students, effectiveness depends on the enrollment of students who match, or “fit” within the school’s mission and philosophy. Extant literature and information gathered from this study suggest the importance of clear target student populations and affording the alternative schools the determination of potential student “fit” and subsequent acceptance for enrollment.

6. Leadership Matters as “Keepers of the Flame” and “Sustainers of Innovation.” Rather than as “drivers for change” as identified by Bryk et al. (2010) in urban elementary schools experiencing successful reform, leaders of innovative alternative high schools serve in a
transformational capacity as “keepers of the flame.” They protect and promote the school’s nontraditional philosophy and culture by steadfastly resisting the constant pull to become more traditional. Intentionally maintaining a shared leadership structure, principals and leaders in alternative schools manage and support relationships within the school, between the school and the community and parents, and perhaps most importantly with the district leadership.

Superintendent support for the creation and sustainability of innovative public alternative schools of choice is essential. Without ongoing financial support and flexibility with state and district policies, the unique nature of the alternative schools could not be sustained. Superintendents play a crucial role as the “sustainers of innovation,” through negotiations with the NYSED to allow for waivers or nontraditional interpretations of state guidelines including measures of effectiveness.

Likewise, NYSED support of and commitment to the creation and maintenance of innovative practices in alternative schools is necessary for the effectiveness and sustainability of such schools. That support and commitment is manifested, in particular, through NYSED engagement in developing and approving nontraditional means for evaluating success of alternative schools and in granting flexibility in methods that allow for innovation and experimentation.

7. Context Matters When Establishing Alternative Schools. While there are exemplary alternative schools, no detailed, single template of leadership and organizational characteristics applies to all settings. Context matters. Alternative school designs focused on individual student development emerge from, and build on, specific district and community needs, circumstances, and resources. With that said, effective alternative schools manifest leadership and organizational characteristics that reflect common philosophical and cultural elements found in
similar types of successful alternative provisions. While alternative schools may “look” different based on their community settings, target populations, and structures, effectiveness in each school can be associated with practices in key essentials areas (Leadership, Parent-Community Ties, Teachers’ Capacity and Commitment, Student-Centered Learning Climate, Instructional Guidance, and Relational Trust).

Concluding Thoughts for Practitioners, Policy Makers & Researchers

Suggestions for Practitioners

Information collected from School A and School B provides evidence that nontraditional schools of choice can be created, provide valued learning, and be maintained by public school districts. Furthermore, approaches and experiences in these schools provide paths for new school designs, and insights into how philosophy and culture as well as leadership and organizational characteristics are associated with effectiveness. While traditional offerings and structures may be sufficient for the majority of students, this study has found that alternative education provisions can provide appropriate options for those who do not fare well under traditional approaches. Most importantly, the study has uncovered orientations and leadership and organizational characteristics that appear to matter for effective and sustained alternative education in alternative schools of choice focusing on whole student development.

Suggestions for Policy Makers

Most students are enrolled in public schools. This study suggests that flexibility for public school districts to be innovative could enable effective and more differentiated provisions to better meet specific student needs that are not met through traditional approaches and structures. The schools in this study benefitted from greater flexibility in meeting state
requirements and support for districts to innovate and incorporate nontraditional approaches that build on a clear and aligned philosophy for teaching and learning.

More generally, research on alternative education seems to show that some alternative school structures and models are *not* effective. Further research on effective alternative schools might well deepen and extend our knowledge of what leadership and organization characteristics and other features are likely to be associated with success in such settings, and provide insights for policies intended to promote and sustain effective nontraditional options.

**Suggestions for Researchers**

This study uncovered several areas where further research is warranted. First, new typologies based on the characteristics of different types of alternative provisions, along the lines laid out in the extended classification developed and presented in this study, could be explored to better distinguish settings, approaches, and structures of alternative education and reveal manifestations of leadership and organizational characteristics that are similar, or differ, by type. Second, research can be undertaken to uncover what types of alternative education structures are most effective with different types of student populations as baseline information for the development of policies at state and district levels. Third, research might explore the manifestations of the “essential elements” of effective alternative education provisions both within and across types, including particular attention to provisions with open versus provisions with restricted enrollments. Fourth, if research is extended to different types of alternative education in comparison with traditional school structures and programs, insights might be developed for improvements in leadership and organizational characteristics for schools and schooling more generally. Fifth, further research comparing leadership for creating and sustaining new school structures with leadership for reforming existing approaches may reveal
differences and additional insights into how and where leadership and organizational characteristics promote effectiveness.

The review of literature on the establishment and sustainability of alternative provisions served as background to the present study of two successful, and somewhat unique, alternative schools. Through interviews with superintendents, school leaders, and teachers in the two schools and their districts, elements of a tentative Theory for Creating & Sustaining Public Alternative Schools of Choice emerged. The theory requires further elaboration and closer assessment with reference to experiences, perceptions, and attitudes in a wider range of alternative education provision. Yet, the initial, tentative elements offer a starting point for reflection on practice, policy, and scholarship. A preliminary listing includes the following elements:

1. District leadership needs to adopt an open view on the effectiveness of traditional and conventional provisions. Where gaps are identified, district leadership needs to be willing to take the risks of creating alternative provisions and commit to sustaining them. This will require a commitment of funding, staff, and substantive support.

2. Alternative schools need a core group of staff personally committed to developing the alternative school philosophy and culture. Staff needs to be given the time and responsibility to create, support, and sustain the alternative schooling option.

3. The philosophy of the alternative school needs to be clearly stated, defining the mission and foundational tenets and taking into account target population and context.

4. Choice membership by all participants in the alternative school community is a necessary condition. Voluntary buy-in and individual commitment to the philosophy and culture
of the alternative school by all parties (students, teachers, and school and district leaders) is crucial.

5. The state authority needs to afford flexibility within which the alternative school has space to innovate and sustain approaches that differ from conventional schools and schooling. In particular, agreements with districts should permit and take into account nontraditional means for the measurement of success.

6. The alternative school needs to be located at a site separate from its counterpart traditional school. Recognition and support for distinctiveness should be afforded by a separate BEDS code.

7. State and district leadership need to provide ongoing flexibility for members of the alternative school community to innovate, establishing and sustaining a distinctive philosophy and culture that is supported by leadership and organizational characteristics that align in support of effective results for every student.

8. Decision-making in the alternative school is shared by all community members – leaders, teachers, and students. Shared decision-making, in such a school, is characterized by active participation in ways that reflect and sustain the school’s culture.

9. The alternative school needs ongoing support and commitment from all stakeholders for its sustainability. The state authorities and district leadership are connected, alongside members of the school community, principals, teachers, students (and their parents), and other representatives of the wider community.
Appendices

APPENDIX A

SURVEY: ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL LEADER/PRINCIPAL DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Male / Female

1. How many years of experience do you have in school administration?
   a. This is my first year
   b. I was a traditional school administrator for ___________ years.
   c. I was an alternative school administrator for ____________ years.

2. How many years have you been the leader of this school?
   a. This is my first year
   b. 2-4 years
   c. 5-7 years
   d. over 7 years

3. Were you hired by your current Superintendent?
   a. Yes
   b. No

4. Are you
   a. Full-time in this position
   b. Part-time in this position

5. If you are part-time, what are your other duties?
   a. Teacher
   b. Leader in another school, which one? __________________________
   c. Other. Please explain ________________________________________

6. How did you become the leader (Principal) of this school?
   a. You chose this position
   b. You were placed in this position
   c. Other, please explain __________________________________________

7. Do you envision changing to a different leadership position in the future?
   a. Yes, please describe ______________________________________________
   b. No
   c. Maybe

8. How soon would you envision making this change?
   a. Within a year
b. Within 2-3 years

c. Within 5 years

d. Unsure

e. Not Applicable

9. How many years did you teach before becoming a school leader?
   a. I was a teacher in a traditional school setting for ____________ years.
   b. I was a teacher in an alternative school setting for ____________ years.
   c. I was never a teacher
APPENDIX B

SUPERINTENDENT INTERVIEW GUIDE

I. School Mission & Effectiveness:
1. How was this alternative school established?
   When was it established?
   Why was it established?
2. What was its original mission?
   Does its mission today reflect that original mission? If no, how would you describe the current mission?
3. Describe how successful this school is in achieving this mission and the method by which you track this success.
4. Are there other ways that you personally measure the success of this school?
5. Describe for me how the decision was made for this school to have its own BEDS code? (Data reported separate from traditional schools in the district)
6. How long have you served as the Superintendent of this district?

II. Alternative School Leadership:
7. What is the governance/administrative structure of this school? Of this district?
8. What are the primary outcomes you use to measure your success as the leader of this district?
9. What are the primary outcomes you use to measure the success of the leader of this school?
   Do these primary outcomes differ from those of traditional principals you supervise?
10. How do you account for this principal’s success stories? What did he/she do to achieve these good outcomes?
11. Reflect on these behaviors. Are some more important than others? Explain.
12. What specifically do you do to support this principal’s success.
13. Who keeps this principal on the right track with regard to overall school effectiveness?
   How does this happen?
14. Describe the obstacles this principal has encountered. Within their school? Within your district? Within your community?
15. How did you assist this principal to overcome these obstacles?
16. In your experience, how do these obstacles differ from those of the traditional school principals you supervise?
17. Are there special features in the alternative school context that drive your roles and responsibilities for supervising this principal?
18. Think back to when you first began. Have you changed your approach with this principal? If so, what have you changed? Why? If not, why not?

III. Instructional Guidance:
   Next, I would like to talk about instructional guidance including the learning and teaching strategies used to help students achieve academic success.
19. What, in your view, are the elements of effective instructional guidance? What specific outcomes or benefits are you after?
20. Describe for me the strategy or strategies you have used to achieve these outcomes. What specifically have you done with this principal to achieve success with teachers? With students?

21. How do you measure the effectiveness of these efforts?

22. Have you been successful? What improvements have you seen in this principal? Have you observed improvements in students?

23. How do you account for these success stories?

24. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others?

25. In your experience, are there differences in these “ingredients for success” for traditional and alternative education principals?

IV. Student-centered Learning Climate:
Next, I would like to talk about creating a student-centered learning climate including a welcoming, safe and orderly school environment with high academic standards that maximizes individual student potential.

26. What, in your view, are the elements of a strong student-centered learning climate? Do you have specific outcomes or targets for principals? For teachers?

27. How do you support this principal to strengthen the student-centered learning climate?

28. How do you measure the effectiveness of these efforts?

29. Have you been successful? In other words, is the climate in this school overall different now than when you first became the superintendent?

30. How do you account for these success stories? In other words, what has been done to achieve these good outcomes?

31. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others?

32. In your experience, are there differences in these “ingredients for success” for traditional and alternative education principals?

33. Is there a difference in the learner-centered climate of this school compared with traditional schools in this district?

34. Are there special features in this alternative school community context that influence your work to develop a student-centered learning climate?

V. Developing Teachers’ Capacity and Commitments:
Next, I would like to talk about the professional capacity and commitments of teachers including their expertise, opportunities for professional development, ability to work together and commitment to the school.

35. What, in your view, are the elements to building strong loyalty, capacity and commitment? Do you have specific desired outcomes?

36. Describe how you support this principal in achieve these outcomes.

37. How do you measure the effectiveness of these efforts?

38. Describe the improvements you have seen in the professional commitment of teachers in this school.

39. How do you account for these success stories?

40. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.

41. In your experience, are there differences in these “ingredients for success” for traditional and alternative education principals?
42. Are there special features in this alternative school community context that influence this principal’s work in strengthening teachers’ loyalty, capacity and commitment?

VI. Parent-community Ties:
Next, I would like to talk about developing strong ties with parents and the community.
43. What, in your view, are the elements of strong parent-community ties? Do you have specific desired outcomes?
44. How do you support this principal to achieve these outcomes?
45. How do you measure the effectiveness of these efforts?
46. Describe the improvements you have seen in this school’s ties with parents and the community?
47. How do you account for these success stories?
48. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.
49. In your experience, are there differences in these “ingredients for success” for traditional and alternative education principals?
50. Are there special features in this alternative school community context that influence this principal’s work with parents and community members?

VII. Reflection:
Next, I’d like you to reflect on your role as superintendent.
51. As you think back to when you first began as a superintendent, what lessons have you learned about supervising, mentoring, and coaching alternative school principals?
52. Do you try to strike a balance between district-wide commonalities and the alternative school principal’s needs to view their school as unique? How do you do this?
53. If you picture yourself as an expert consultant for new superintendents with alternative schools, what advice would you give them about the most important “dos” and “don’ts” in their work with their alternative school principals?
54. Describe for me the “do’s” and “don’ts” you would suggest to new alternative school principals?

VIII. Closing:
55. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the leadership and organizational characteristics of this alternative school?
APPENDIX C

PRINCIPAL INTERVIEW GUIDE

I. School Mission & Effectiveness:
1. How was this alternative school established?
   When was it established?
   Why was it established?
2. What was its original mission?
   Does its mission today reflect that original mission? If no, how would you describe the current mission?
3. Describe how successful you are in achieving this mission and the method by which you track this success.
   Are there other ways that you personally measure the success of this school?
4. Describe for me how the decision was made for this school to have its own BEDS code? (Data reported separate from traditional schools in the district)
5. What are the entrance requirements for students to attend this school? What is the process they go through?
6. What are the requirements for students to successfully exit this school?
7. How is this school currently funded? How sustainable are these funding sources?

II. Student Support Services:
8. Describe for me support services provided to students enrolled in this school.
   How are these support services provided?
   How is the effectiveness of these services measured?

III. Alternative School Leadership:
9. What is the governance/administrative structure of this school?
10. Describe your vision for this school. How was this vision created? Describe how you plan to accomplish this vision.
11. What are the primary outcomes you use to measure your success as the leader of this school?
12. How successful have you been in achieving these outcomes?
13. How do you account for your success stories? What did you do to achieve these good outcomes?
14. Reflect on these behaviors. Are some more important than others? Explain.
15. Look back to when you first began your role as principal at this school. Have you changed your approach or priorities for success? If so, how and why? If not, why not?
16. Who and what keeps you on track with regard to overall school effectiveness? How does this happen?
17. Describe the obstacles you have encountered. Within your school. Within your district. Within your community.
18. How did you overcome these obstacles?
19. For those who have been a principal in a traditional school, how are these obstacles different in this alternative school than in the previous traditional school?
20. Are there special features in your alternative school context that drive your role and responsibility as principal?

IV. **Instructional Guidance:**
Next, I would like to talk about instructional guidance including the learning and teaching strategies teachers use to help students achieve academic success.

21. What, in your view, are the elements of effective instructional guidance? What specific outcomes are you after?
22. Describe for me the strategy or strategies you have used to achieve these outcomes.
23. How do you measure the effectiveness of these efforts?
24. What improvement have you seen in teachers? What improvement have you seen in students?
   How do you account for these success stories?
25. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.
26. Are there special features in your alternative school context that influence your efforts to provide instructional guidance? Explain. (Probe) Obstacles?

V. **Student-centered Learning Climate:**
Next, I would like to talk about creating a student-centered learning climate including a welcoming, safe and orderly school environment with high academic standards that maximizes individual student potential.

27. What, in your view, are the elements of a strong student-centered learning climate?
28. How do you improve the student-centered learning climate? Did you start with a specific strategy?
29. How do you measure the effectiveness of your efforts? What specific outcomes are you after?
30. What improvements have you seen as a result of these efforts?
   How do you account for these success stories?
31. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.
32. Are there special features in your alternative school context that influence your efforts to develop a student-centered learning climate? Explain. (Probe) Obstacles?

VI. **Developing Teachers’ Capacity and Commitments:**
Next, I would like to talk about the professional capacity and commitments of teachers including their expertise, opportunities for professional development, ability to work together and commitment to this school.

33. What, in your view, are the elements to building strong loyalty, capacity and commitment? What specific outcomes are you after?
34. Describe for me the strategy or strategies you have used to achieve these outcomes.
35. How do you measure the effectiveness of these efforts?
36. Describe the improvements you have seen in the professional commitment of teachers in this school.
   How do you account for these success stories?
37. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.
38. Are there special features in your alternative school community context that influence your efforts aimed at staff loyalty, capacity and continuing improvement? (Probe) Obstacles?

VII. Parent-community Ties:
Next, I would like to talk about developing strong ties with parents and the community.
39. What, in your view, are the elements of strong parent-community ties? What specific outcomes are you after?
40. Describe for me the strategy or strategies you have used to achieve these outcomes.
41. How do you measure the effectiveness of your efforts?
42. Describe the improvements you have seen in this school’s ties with parents and the community? How do you account for these success stories?
43. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others? Explain.
44. Are there special features in your alternative school community context that influence your work with parents and community members? (Probe) Obstacles?

VIII. Leader Reflections:
Next, I’d like you to reflect on your role as principal of this school.
45. As you think back to when you first began in this role, what are the primary ways that you have come to know what you now know?
46. If you knew then what you know now, is there anything you would have done differently? How do you believe it would have changed your school today? Explain.
47. As you reflect, are there beliefs or philosophies that you hold about being an effective principal in an alternative school setting that are unchanged since you began as a principal?
48. If you imagine yourself as an expert consultant for new principals in an alternative school setting, what advice would you give them about the most important “dos” and “don’ts”?
49. How, if at all, do your relationships with your teachers influence your thoughts and actions as a principal?
50. How, if at all, do your relationships with your fellow administrators influence youth thoughts and actions as a principal?
51. How, if at all, does your relationship with your superintendent influence your thoughts and actions as a principal?

IX. Influence of Others:
52. Who has been the most influential “mentor” for you in your administrative career? Why? How did this mentoring occur?

X. Closing:
Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the leadership and organizational characteristics of this school?
APPENDIX D

TEACHER INTERVIEW GUIDE

I. **School Mission & Effectiveness**:
   1. How long have you been a teacher in this alternative school?
   2. What is the current mission of this school?
   3. Describe how successful you believe this school is in achieving this mission.
      How is its success measured or tracked?
      Are there other ways that you personally measure the success of this school?

II. **Student Support Services**:
   4. Describe for me support services provided to students enrolled in this school.
      How are these support services provided?

III. **Alternative School Leadership**:
   5. Describe for me the primary outcomes you would use to measure your principal’s success
      as the leader of this school.
   6. How do you account for your principal’s success stories? In other words, what leadership behaviors does your principal display to achieve these good outcomes?
   7. Reflect on these behaviors. Are some more important than others? Explain.

IV. **Instructional Guidance**:
   Next, I would like to talk about instructional guidance including the learning and teaching strategies used to help students achieve academic success.
   8. What, in your view, are the elements of effective instructional guidance?
   9. How does your principal make learning and teaching a priority in this school?
   10. Describe for me how your principal provides you with instructional guidance to be successful with students.
   11. Have your learning and teaching strategies improved?
       How do you account for these success stories?
   12. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others?

V. **Student-centered Learning Climate**:
   Next, I would like to talk about creating a student-centered learning climate including a welcoming, safe and orderly school environment with high academic standards that maximizes individual student potential.
   13. What, in your view, are the elements of a strong student-centered learning climate?
   14. Describe for me how your principal develops and maintains a student-centered learning climate.
   15. Describe for me how you as a teacher develop and maintain a student-centered learning climate.
   16. Have you seen or experienced an improvement in the climate of this school?
       How do you account for these success stories?
   17. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others?
VI. Developing Teachers’ and Other Staff Members’ Capacity and Commitments:
Next, I would like to talk about the professional capacity and commitments of teachers including expertise, opportunities for professional development, ability to work together and commitment to this school.

18. What, in your view, are the elements to building strong loyalty, capacity and commitment?
19. Describe for me how your principal improves teachers’ loyalty, capacity and their commitments to learn and improve.
20. Have you seen or experienced an improvement in the loyalty, capacity and professional commitment of teachers in this school?
   How do you account for these success stories?
21. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others?

VII. Parent-community Ties:
Next, I would like to talk about developing strong ties with parents and the community.

22. What, in your view, are the elements of strong parent-community ties?
23. Describe for me how your principal develops and maintains parent-community ties.
24. How do you as a teacher develop and maintain strong ties with parents and the community?
25. Have you seen or experienced an improvement in parent-community ties?
   How do you account for these success stories?
26. Reflect on these “ingredients for success.” Are some more important than others?

VIII. Closing:
27. Is there anything else you would like to tell me about the leadership and organizational characteristics of this alternative school?
December 14, 2016

Dear Lynn,

I am working on a doctoral dissertation at the University at Albany entitled “A Comparison of Leadership and Organizational Characteristics of Effective Alternative High Schools with Open and Restricted Enrollments.” I would like your permission to use, and slightly modify, the data collection instruments (including surveys and interview guides for superintendents, principals, and teachers) that you created for your doctoral dissertation at the University at Albany entitled “Elementary School and Middle School Principals’ Theories of Action in Two Rural School Districts.”

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References


