Disrupting the school-to-prison pipeline: implementing alternative education programs to reduce student disciplinary issues

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Disrupting the School-to-Prison Pipeline:
Implementing Alternative Education Programs to Reduce Student Disciplinary Issues

by

Michael Burns

A Dissertation
Submitted to the University at Albany, State University of New York
In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree
of Doctor of Philosophy

The School of Education
Department of Educational Policy and Leadership
Spring 2021
ABSTRACT

Conventional punitive detention- and suspension-based correctional approaches to student disruptive behavior are widely considered ineffective and counterproductive. Instead of offering opportunities for change and growth, they punish students they deem incorrigible by excluding them from instruction. While effective alternative approaches and programs exist, their use is far less widespread than would seem indicated. The purpose of this study is to explore how schools with successful alternative educational and disciplinary programs manage to overcome resistance to change and create settings that sustain the education for these students who through repeated disruptive behavior tend to fail in conventional punitive disciplinary programs. Three school districts in New York which sustained successful alternative education programs were studied. How the programs were formed and overcame resistance to change, how educators define success beyond improved graduation rates, and how educators have maintained that success over time were the focus questions of the study. By investigating how these three programs came into existence and have sustained their success over time, this study attempts to shed light on why there are not more alternative education programs to educate disruptive youth who are at risk for dropping out of school. The findings suggest that most Alt-Ed programs succeed in idiosyncratic ways with high, perhaps complete, dependence on committed charismatic leadership, and little in the way of generic evidence that could be easily scaled up.

Keywords: Alternative Education, Discipline, Collaboration, At-Risk Students, “School to Prison Pipeline”
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

In writing this dissertation, I created a conceptual map of the responses from the different educators from around the region who allowed me into their schools and agreed to be interviewed. Though I cannot thank them by name here, I will personally. The idea of a conceptual map can also be applied to my doctoral journey.

Dr. Heinz Dieter Meyer has been my map maker, my chair, and my guide. Dr. Meyer provided knowledge, guidance, and encouragement for my wandering. I connected with him easily through his teaching style, and he included me on a research trip to Germany and the Netherlands, where I learned firsthand how administrators in those schools manage student behavior. That work culminated in a CIES conference presentation in Montreal, which became the trail head into the research for this dissertation: alternative settings in New York schools. I am grateful for Dr. Meyer’s guidance and tutelage; I am humbled by his patience.

Dr. Alan Wagner was the first professor I met at Albany University, and I am grateful for his service on my committee, and I appreciate him as my teacher. Dr. Wagner opened my mind to the world of statistical analysis, including qualitative analysis. His suggestions at my proposal defense set my feet on a clear path to completion, and I am thankful for his guidance.

Dr. Jan Hammond served as member of my committee, and her clarity and guidance, particularly in direction, style, and formatting, saw me through to completion. As a teacher, her influence runs much deeper. Dr. Hammond saw something in me as a graduate student in the Certificate of Advanced Study program at SUNY New Paltz, and she pushed me to join the PhD cohort. Pursuing the doctorate became a reality one afternoon in her office when she said I would make a great candidate and extended the invitation.

Dr. Rose Rudnitski, Dr. Kathryn Schiller, Dr. Hal Lawson, and Dr. Aaron Benavot, were notable professors on my journey. The courses they taught and the advice they gave me at
different crossroads were important and instructive, providing direction along the path. To the members of the New Paltz Albany cohort, my collaborators and fellow students, I thank you for the camaraderie and the support, for the company on long car rides, and for the burgers, the chicken wings, the sushi, and the laughter in New Paltz, Albany, Cologne, and Amsterdam: Joseph Lloyd, Jim Delviscio, Harry Leonardatos, Liz VonWurmb, Annie Streiff, Louis Inoa, Cathy Affinge, Melissa Pittman, and Michelle Martoni. A special thanks to Dr. Joseph Lloyd for serving as reader at my proposal defense, and for his unyielding encouragement and Sunday morning brunches.

I wish to thank the students, teachers, administrators and staff at Minisink Valley High School for the support and encouragement along my journey. A special thanks to my supervisors, Mr. Ken Hauck, Mr. Jack Latini, and Mr. Brian Monahan, for affording me time not just for travel to Albany for class, but time to travel to Germany, the Netherlands, Montreal, and across New York for research. I wish to express my appreciation for the late Dr. Martha Murray and the late Mrs. Kay Mellon for their support and encouragement. They were two educators who believed in me. I would like to thank Mrs. Emily Rufino and Mr. Chris DiLeo, two English chairs who proofread so much writing over the years.

My deepest sentiments of gratitude go to my family. I thank my parents Robert and Martha, for a lifetime of support, love, and encouragement. I thank my children Daniel and Kaitlyn for always believing in me and for pushing me to finish. Most importantly, I thank my wife Diane, for her love, patience, understanding, and encouragement. She makes me believe in me. Without Diane, none of my endeavors would be possible.
Table of Contents

CHAPTER I  STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM
Feeding the Pipeline Overview  1
Academics/Discipline/Attendance  2
Zero Tolerance and the School to Prison Pipeline  4
Suspension Correlates with Non Completion  5
Disrupting the Pipeline  6
Purpose of This Study  7
Alternative Setting Programs  8
Merits of Successful Programs  9
Research Questions  10
Significance and Limitations  11
Plan of this Dissertation  11

CHAPTER II  LITERATURE REVIEW
Overview of Disrupting the Pipeline  13
Police Presence in Schools  13
Zero Tolerance  17
Criminalization of Student Behavior  20
Resistance to Change  25
The Changing Tide  27
PBIS and Mindfulness  32
Barriers and Impediments to Implementing Alt Ed Programs  37
Summary: Disrupting the Pipeline  44

CHAPTER III METHODOLOGY
Data Methodology  47
Research Questions  47
Research Design  48
CHAPTER I: STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Feeding the Pipeline Overview

Exclusionary discipline practices in schools have evolved with the emergence of a culture of accountability (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001). Social and political beliefs about the poor state of American education on an international scale have driven legislation aimed at improving the US education system (Meyer & Benavot, 2013). The public’s perception of failing academics and publicized incidents of violence in schools helped to cultivate the theme of zero tolerance. Zero tolerance laws require punitive disciplinary measures, such as minimum suspensions for infractions once handled at administrators’ discretion. The problem is that this has become counterproductive (Nolan, 2011; Fuentes, 2011). Frequently, school policies require exclusionary disciplinary practices that have recently proven ineffective. Because of fealty to tradition, resistance to change, or lack of understanding of alternative methodologies, conventional discipline policies persist in most public schools, and the policies are failing.

Research demonstrates that “suspensions carry implications for cumulative disadvantage, labeling, and deviance amplification” (Mowen, Brent, & Bowman, 2020, p. 741). Disciplinary practices intended to modify student behavior are, according to research, making misbehavior worse, which only serves to compound the problem. Mowen, Brent, and Bowman explored exclusionary disciplinary practices and offered a theory:

‘cumulative disadvantage…’ as negative events accumulate, their detrimental effects on behavior progressively accumulate and reinforce each other… rather than serving as a deterrent, authorities may escalate subsequent levels of offending.” (p. 742)

Traditional exclusionary discipline policies have led to increases in student non-completion, or increased drop-out rates. Punitive disciplinary measures serve as an overreaction to student misbehavior and foster a circular problem of life-long discipline trouble. Experience (including that of the researcher), seems to support a conclusion that students who drop out do so for two
reasons: students who receive punitive discipline instead of restorative measures in school more frequently drop out than their peers, and students with school anxiety that produces attendance or avoidance issues drop out of school. Not all who do not complete high school become inmates, but 82% of incarcerated individuals never earned a high school diploma. Punitive disciplinary measures feed the School to Prison Pipeline phenomenon (Heitzeg, 2014; Mallet, 2016), and this study will present potential solutions of alternative educational settings as more effective responses to deviant behavior and explore how they can become more widely adopted.

Academics, Discipline and Attendance

Two major pieces of legislation that created the atmosphere of zero tolerance were NCLB, or No Child Left Behind, (2001), and SAVE, or Schools Against Violence in Education, (2000). SAVE established minimum consequences for student infractions, which effectively removed administrator discretion, and NCLB added pressure to schools and individual teachers by requiring attendance, academic, and discipline statistics to be made public. Promoting the notion of accountability, these public policies were written to hold teachers and administrators to higher standards regarding student performance, including behavior, with the goal of school improvement as the focus.

The enactment of the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) law in 2001, juxtaposed with zero tolerance policies and unintentionally, at least in the initial rollout of the law, exacerbated the school to prison pipeline. The NCLB law was implemented to hold schools accountable for student performance, with concerns for students who traditionally have performed poorly… (Mallett, 2016, p. 19)

To protect academic standings, and to comply with state law, school districts sought to curb disruptive behaviors to promote an environment of learning, but research shows zero tolerance is a counterproductive policy. In 2001, Ayers, Dohrn, and Ayers, collaborated on *Resisting the Drive for Punishment in our Schools: Zero Tolerance*. In a chapter titled, “Two
Punches Suspended for Life,” Rick Ayers explored a case study of three girls engaged in a fight that lasted a few seconds, but the district categorized the incident as a gang assault. The district’s legal counsel, regarding one of the combatants, argued, “We need to expel this student to send a clear message that this kind of violence will not be tolerated” (p. 26). Ayers reports that over the course of the case study, the court determined that the district’s evidence did not support the claim of gang affiliation, and the expulsion was reversed. While the matter played out in the courts, students were removed from school, effectively denying them their education.

Educators and parents acknowledge that violence and drugs are quintessentially disruptive to the educational process, but the literature suggests that the laws are over-extended. “In all categories of crime and in all parts of the nation, the crime rate fell, reaching its lowest levels in 35 years” (Levitt, 2004, p. 163). Mirroring society, general violence and disruptions in school fell to decades-low levels by 2004, but in response to pressure to improve the American education system, politicians adopted strict discipline policies that demonstrated a lack of flexibility. The laws prevented consideration of each case on its own merits, and have fostered disciplinary practices that are counterproductive to the educational process:

School districts began developing their own “zero tolerance” rules, going well beyond the ESEA or state law mandates … even though there is no evidence of an increase in school violence – merely an increase in reporting of school violence, both in the press and the newly created state registries… new policies went beyond banning weapons, which were already prohibited, to include any item that could be used as a weapon, drugs including medications… minor fights, heat of the moment threats, and other incidents that represented little risk to school safety. (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001, p. 129)

With the goal of improving the educational setting in classrooms and improving school performance, schools targeted misbehavior, even minor misbehavior, which led to increased disciplinary action. Increased disciplinary action caused increased incidents of suspension. Repetitive suspension increases the rate of non-completion, a major factor in evaluating school
performance. The repetition of the cycle of misbehavior and negative consequence can be explained by a “stepping stone perspective…the behavioral effect of labeling could intensify as events compound upon each other…” (Mowen, et al., 2020, p. 743). Ultimately, student suspensions accrue as one suspension tends to lead to the next for many youth at risk, and districts with high suspension rates are labeled by State Education Departments as failing, which completes the circle that needs to be broken.

Zero Tolerance and the School to Prison Pipeline

The culture of accountability and the heightened legal ramifications of zero tolerance created the position of the school resource officer (SRO). SROs are frequently professional police officers, and literature shows their presence feeds the cycle of suspension and student discipline. Several researchers state the presence of SROs in schools led to the criminalization of student behavior:

At the dawn of zero-tolerance school discipline, popular political discourses had already begun to demonize the young urban “super predator.” Additionally, crime-control policies aimed at urban youth – drug laws, truancy laws, curfews, loitering ordinances, and order maintenance—became punitive… (Nolan, p. 26)

Throughout the literature, the case is made that police presence in the hallways often escalates minor infractions. For instance, the circumstance of a student late to class or engaged in verbal altercations with peers or teachers often devolves into disorderly conduct charges and arrest, once the SRO engages in the matter. Engagement with law enforcement in the hallways can perpetuate an increase of incidents of suspension from school because if the student is arrested for the disruption, school administration must then acknowledge a crime was committed in the school, which really simply criminalizes behavior that could only be minor disobedience or disruption. Engagement with police means students who may have faced verbal correction or
minor school disciplinary action are elevated to the juvenile justice system and elevated consequences at school.

Parents and educators universally agree, serious incidents, such as those involving drugs or violence, require engagement with law enforcement, but literature suggests that daily SRO presence escalates minor offenses and sets into motion the pipeline to prison phenomenon. According to one study, “The single greatest predictor of involvement in the juvenile [justice] system is a history of disciplinary referrals at school” (Fowler, 2011, p. 14). Fowler goes on to report that schools should use discretion in handling incidents locally before involving law enforcement. She reports from her research that students as young as six years old have been referred to SROs, and this sets the young student onto the path feeding the pipeline to prison. Confirming the findings of Fowler and Nolan, Mallet concludes, “The presence of police officers has increased student arrests on school grounds between 300% and 500% since the establishment of zero tolerance policies, most of the time for non-serious offenses…” (Mallet, 2016, p. 20).

There is a general consensus that the presence of law officers increases the rates of student discipline and engagement with the juvenile justice system.

**Suspension Correlates with Non Completion**

Educators know implicitly that youth at risk who face suspension from school, particularly long term suspension, frequently fall into patterns that lead to dropping out of school (Freeman, Lansford, & Suh, 2015). Empirical data has shown that students on long-term suspension from school are prone to eventually engaging in criminal activity, which in turn leads to incarceration. Alison Evan Cuellar and Sara Markowitz in their empirical research concluded that school suspension creates the school-to-prison pipeline:

…out-of-school suspension may increase criminal offending behavior by problem youth, more than doubling the probability of arrest. They explore zero-tolerance policies, which
they define as “mandated suspension or expulsion… often without consideration of the circumstances. (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015, p. 98)

Their study analyzed the impact of school suspension on juvenile justice. They explored the types of offenses, and found that through descriptive statistics and considering different variables, 24% of their sample were referred to juvenile justice, 7.8% for felonies:

The results show that youth who are suspended out of school on days when school is in session have a statistically significantly higher probability of committing an offense than youth who are not… this is a significantly larger than 13% increase in property offenses. (p. 101).

To compound exposure to criminal activity, high school dropouts are 4 times as likely to experience other negative outcomes, like being terminated from work, being on government assistance, having poor health, or becoming victims of substance abuse. These negative outcomes have led some researchers to conclude that suspension and dropout are public health concerns (Lansford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2015). For Lansford et al, the connections are clear: disciplinary issues lead to suspension, which leads to non-completion.

**Disrupting the Pipeline**

United Stated Education Secretary Arne Duncan (serving from 2009-2015), published a memo positing that 95% of out-of-school suspension were for non-violent, minor disruptions such as tardiness or disrespect:

Suspending students also often fails to help them develop the skills and strategies they need to improve their behavior and avoid future problems. Suspended students are less likely to graduate on time and are more likely to be suspended again, repeat a grade, dropout of school, and become involved in the juvenile justice system. (Arne Duncan, 2014)

School officials who seek to break the cycle of suspended students leading to failing schools seek to disrupt the pipeline trend. They explore alternative education practices for disciplinary cases as an effective means to reduce dropout and prevent the youth from entering the juvenile
justice system. Some behavior, like violence or drug-related activities, threaten general safety and necessitate long-term suspension, but some school leaders have sought alternative educational settings to continue to educate students who are suspended long term. Researchers and educators now recognize that youth at risk who engage in disruption, if left uneducated, were likely to eventually enter the adult criminal justice system. Alternative settings programs were created to address the high risks facing school dropouts.

… There is a notion of retribution as well, since modern school discipline policies care little for the well-being of the student… and operate much more along the “let the punishment fit the crime” model of the adult criminal justice system. (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001, p. 129)

A system of school discipline rooted in retribution (rather than remediation), will yield similar results as the adult justice system: recidivism. To keep youth at risk out of the adult system, different measures must be taken with youthful offenders. Alternative education setting is such a measure.

**Purpose of This Study**

The purpose of this study is first to explore how alternative programs operate and affect troubled students in need of an education. Secondly, there is little research demonstrating why, if alternative education programs exist and are successful, alternative programs are not more prevalent, so this study will also examine the barriers to instituting alternative programs and suggest solutions to those barriers. Providing students an education despite their disruptive behavior may disrupt the school to prison pipeline.

Though good information is readily available about research-based programs that have proven successful in reducing disciplinary problems and improving academics, few districts are implementing such programs. (Fowler, 2011, p. 16)
Using qualitative methodology, this study will explore three school districts in New York that have alternative placement settings for troubled youth who struggle with discipline and suspension to the extent it adversely affects their education. The links between the alternative setting and success of these students will be explored. The efficacy of the alternative programs will be examined through case studies.

**Alternative Setting Programs**

As a vehicle for disrupting the pipeline, research demonstrates alternative education programs have yielded positive results. Some districts have developed programs with an alternative setting for youth at risk who commit repetitive disciplinary infractions. This study will incorporate as case studies three New York schools with alternative programs. To define alternative for the purpose of this study: in 1975, the Education of Handicapped Children Act was passed, granting special and separate schools for students with serious emotional or learning disabilities. In 1990, the law was reauthorized as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, or IDEA, that guaranteed equal access to education for students for whom the public school is not appropriate. For this study, an alternative setting will mean a program within the public school, either off hours or in another part of a building, or in another building in a different part of the district, that educates troubled children using district staff. Such programs are not exclusively designed for IDEA children, though students with disabilities may attend. Under IDEA, children with disabilities are assured a Free and Public Education, or FAPE, meaning special needs students must be educated in the least restrictive environment, determined by their individual needs. Alternative education settings may be appropriate, but the programs are designed for youth with behavior issues, not special needs students exclusively.
The youth at risk attending Alternative Ed programs in this study were in public schools and found themselves in disciplinary trouble. Some involved were classified under IDEA, but most were not. For this study, students will not be differentiated by IDEA classification. District-run alternative education programs in these case studies were designed for those who attend the regular public schools but exhibit violent or disruptive behaviors, or have school avoidance issues. One school hosts the students during the day in a separate wing from their general program; one district hosts a program in a separate building; the third school blends elements of alternative programs into their daily procedures. The practices of each will be compared and contrasted. Differences will be explored, and success will be measured.

**Merits of Successful Programs**

For this study, common threads between successful programs will be explored. One 2013 study by Swain-Bradway, Swoszowski, Boden, and Sprague, entitled, “Voices from the Field: Perspectives of PBIS Implementation in Alternative Educational Settings,” examined what works and what fails in Alternative Ed. Swain-Bradway et al. note:

33-75% of students in Alternative Ed schools display behaviors consistent with emotional or behavioral disabilities… 65-70% of students in juvenile justice programs meet the criteria for [various] mental health conditions. Such students display patterns of antisocial behavior that make them ill-suited for public school… particularly [because in public schools] punishment as a response to problem behavior is common. (Swain-Bradway, et al, 2013, p. 32)

Their study demonstrated that the student involvement in the juvenile justice system is a result of the four barriers for the success: 1) lack of staff buy-in; 2) punishment as response to problem behavior; 3) system needs; 4) youth characteristics (p. 40). Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies (PBIS) have been adopted in public schools in the United States as a solution to disciplinary cases. PBIS offers a rewards-based system of student management rather than a punishment-based system, but, “less than 2% of all settings implement PBIS” (p. 34). PBIS,
like other alternative measures, requires implementation and financial support. Swain-Bradley et al. (2013) could add financial burden to the list of barriers.

For this study, questions about PBIS will be included as a part of the interviews conducted with school personnel. There is a volume of research on Alt Ed programs in which students attend off campus locations, such as Board of Cooperative Educational Services schools or Juvenile Justice Programs. There is limited research on local alternate setting programs, held at the district or building level with district employees. The literature demonstrates that alternatives should exist beyond Zero Tolerance, punishment-based systems, but few have explored models where troubled youth are educated in a more appropriate setting, even if there are additional costs involved: “Schools should fund Alternative Education Programs… Every public school [in Florida] should provide students with the option of attending an alternative setting…” (Schoonover, 2009, p. 117). Dr. Schoonover reports that “only 50% of students expelled in rural districts [in Florida]” can attend Alternative Ed programs, where “nearly 100% of students in larger districts have that opportunity” (p. 17). Schoonover, like others, posits that Alternative Ed. programs should exist, but he does not explore the programs that do exist in his study of Zero Tolerance. This study will contribute to the emerging field of by exploring successful local programs within schools employing district staff.

**Research Questions**

The research questions for this study focus on better understanding the Alternative Education setting for students who may struggle to achieve success in K-12 schools.

**RQ1:** What is involved in creating an Alternative Setting environment for youth at risk who struggle to find success in traditional settings?
RQ2: What are the impediments to establishing Alt Ed programs, and how do the benefits outweigh the barriers?

RQ3: How do educators define success in Alternative Education Settings?

RQ4: Why are there not more Alternative Education programs operating in public schools today?

Secondary and tertiary considerations will explore efficacy, or the administrations’ perceptions of how well their program works against an informal cost benefit analysis of the programs. Questions will explore the mechanics of the program including: eligibility, structure, staffing, curricula, expenditures, rate of return to general program, rate of recidivism, academic performance, and graduation rates.

Significance and Limitations

Common threads within the literature explore race and socioeconomic status of students who are suspended from school or who are involved in interactions with law enforcement. Though some exploration of how and why they are suspended from school is germane, this study will focus on the impact of alternative educational programs on troubled youth and the schools that host the alternative programs, specifically how well the district leaders believe their programs deal with ending recidivism and improving graduation rates across the student population. The rationale for conducting this study is that it is understood students suspended from school without the support of an alternative program fail, which leads to non-completion or increased dropout rates. The body of literature points out that Alternative Ed programs exist, and the researchers advocate that they should exist. Successful programs do exist, so the reason they are not widely utilized invites further investigation and consideration.

Plan of This Dissertation
Chapter II reviews the literature on alternative education, highlighting key research that gives further understanding into the issue of school to prison pipeline. Chapter III introduces the methodology used for this study. Chapter IV shares the findings of this research. Chapter V guides the reader toward conclusions that can be drawn from this study. Implications for practitioners and policymakers are shared as well as recommendations for future research.
CHAPTER II: LITERATURE REVIEW

Overview of Disrupting the Pipeline

The research surrounding school discipline, crime in school, and suspension from school, has some universal themes. Most authors agree that schools have become too harsh in their discipline policies. They agree that police/SRO presence in schools generally increases the severity of incidents of disciplinary action. The literature generally supports the need for revision of disciplinary practices to include alternative setting instruction models: there is common support for addressing social issues at the root of misbehavior, and finding programs to enable students to experience success.

Teaching mindfulness, and other PBIS strategies, and addressing the psychological motivators behind the misbehavior of disruptive youth need to be the broader focal points for school administrators. Student placement in alternative programs instead of removal from school is effective in reducing the behavior, so it enables the youth at risk to experience academic success, which creates a circle of positive school experience and reward. Understanding the barriers to the implementation of alternative setting programs is important to understand why there are so few programs in public schools, despite their reported success.

Police Presence in Schools

Kathleen Nolan, in her book, *Police in the Hallways*, defines the cultural phenomenon that has come to be known as the School to Prison Pipeline. She asserts that students do not land in prison after minor incidents in school, but rather on-going “heavy policing in various domains in their lives” (Nolan, 2011, p. 15). She states that the youth accrue summons tickets for minor misbehaviors, and when they miss court appearances, the infractions begin to compound. Nolan further positions that the misbehaviors, though bad behavior brought the youth in trouble in school
and in court, also brought certain levels of satisfaction: “… the result of their oppositional behavior, they tacitly sought certain personal benefits… from a deep sense of educational and economic exclusion… students found ways to regain personal ownership of the self.” (Nolan, 2011, p. 16) This theory mirrors widely cited research on the appeal of gangs: Nolan suggests that the misbehavior brings cultural satisfaction within the youths’ families and social circles, namely street credit. Nolan interviewed some students regarding the root cause of the perpetuation of violence in their lives, and the responses were telling. One boy’s mental model of surviving in the Bronx was to be tough:

I asked him to explain why he thought young people engage in physical violence. He said ‘I used to think fighting was a normal thing… I’m a kid from the Bronx.’” Nolan asked another student, “… whether or not young people could avoid violence if they wanted to.” He answered, “I don’t know. There’s rules in the hood… they’ve never been written down, but every person knows them.” She followed with, “Who make the rules?” He answered, “The streets make the rules.” (Nolan, 2011, p. 135)

Nolan writes about the rise of this cultural phenomenon in urban settings. Gangs and street crime are not as prevalent in suburban settings and rural settings, but certain youth at risk find suspension and pathways to prison in those settings as well. Nolan attributes the presence of police in public schools today as the post industrialization efforts to curb crime, particularly in urban settings. She sees control and social order as cultural movements in the second half of the 20th century:

The current trend in punitive school discipline and social policy… are not new… Historically, numerous scholars have described public schools, as well as prisons, as repressive institutions… largely a response to the massive influx of poor immigrants into US cities, an attempt to instill social order by disciplining and containing the “dangerous classes.” (Nolan, 2011, p. 21)

Nolan theorized that discipline policies became increasingly stricter to bring social order and to develop productive members of the growing labor market. She called it a culture of control.
This control, however, causes a cyclical problem for the students engaging in the misbehavior. Nolan conducted her interviews with those who were caught in the cycle. One student explained that legitimate employers, like McDonald’s, ask for information about school, grades, and grade level. She explained how she could not get the job at McDonald’s because she was 18 in 10th grade with poor marks. She remarked that she did not want people to know those facts about her. Nolan quotes: “The easy thing would be to let me stand on a corner and sell [drugs]. Why? I want to have money in my pockets. It won’t be a legit job, but at least I have a job. At least I have money” (Nolan, 2011, p. 147). The anecdotes Nolan shares are similar, and the sentiment is familiar: strict school rules and the establishment culture in school conflict with the realities of their lives, particularly on the street. They get into trouble, struggle academically, and these facts deprive them from what this student described as a legit job. Places of business were also not hiring students with disciplinary records.

Nolan described the presence of police in the school as a natural transition: she reasoned that schools in urban settings were experiencing the violence and crime that the youth were experiencing on the streets. The police took over school discipline to attempt to reign in the schools and bring order and social control. Nolan posits, however, that the very presence of law enforcement in public schools criminalizes student behavior. Street crime aside, the police also handle disruption, insubordination, and lateness to class. Infractions that were traditionally handled by school administration became police matters. Hallway infractions resulted in summonses to court for disorderly conduct. Once the courts are engaged, for Nolan and others who subscribe to the pipeline analogy, the cycle begins. Urban schools have had police in school for decades, but public perception of increased violence, drugs, and discipline issues have prompted legislation like SAVE 2000. The role of the School Resource Officer, funded by public
taxes, was legislated into existence, and suburbia and rural schools soon had SROs patrolling the hallways, like their urban counterparts.

Christopher Mallett penned a 2016 article *The School to Prison Pipeline: a critical review of the punitive paradigm shift*, and he viewed the presence of police schools negatively, particularly in lower socioeconomic environments.

In lower income neighborhoods… the impact of these security personnel… can be much harsher on students… can produce negative reactions, fears, or worries about their school… in some schools, students may feel resentment and negative feelings toward surveillance and oversight itself… (Mallett, 2016, p. 18)

Mallett postulates that even in wealthier suburban school settings, surveillance and security personnel have adverse effects, though not as deeply experienced as by poor students. The presence of police in the academic environment sets the wrong tone. He describes the atmosphere as prison-like and attributes police presence to “contributing to the disorder” (p. 18). Mallett echoes previous studies, asserting police in schools, “They do more harm than good for students through increasing the criminalization of… minor problems” (p. 21).

Mallett argues that “the policy problem is… utilization of police officers in schools is significantly greater than the evidence of their positive impact on school safety,” (p. 21) asserting that their presence is overwhelming in schools across the region he sampled, and the correlation between their presence and improved school safety was negligible, or worse. Mallett argued that the most common infraction police encounter is disobedience, so they do little to disrupt patterns of crime, or at least serious infractions. Remarking on a 2013 longitudinal study in Texas involving six million youth at risk, Mallett cites:

A single suspension or expulsion from school doubles the risk for a student repeating a grade, itself a serious risk factor for dropping out of high school… therefore the outcome [of police in school] are a serious risk for involvement in the juvenile justice system…
discretionary school offense not involving a weapon made juvenile court three times as likely…. (p. 21)

For Mallett, suspension for non-violent incidents, including disobedience, sets into motion potential recidivism. He writes that even a single suspension can start the student onto the wrong pathway, so for him the involvement of law enforcement criminalizes disobedience by escalating the matter for some youth from detention to incarceration.

Zero Tolerance

In her 2011 article for Educational Leadership, “How can schools create positive culture when they treat students like criminals,” Judith Brown-Dianis posited a theory that the roots of zero tolerance find their source in the 1980’s and Ronald Reagan’s War on Drugs. Juvenile possession of drugs, or membership, or perceived membership, in gangs fueled public opinion of juvenile misbehavior. Brown-Dianis notes that Jesse Jackson contacted her firm, Advancement Project, to assist in filing a Civil Rights case against a school in Decatur, Illinois for suspending seven students for two years for a fight that broke out and lasted 17 seconds. Jackson argued that the punishment was too harsh for a schoolyard fight.

Brown-Dianis quoted Jackson as remarking on the tax money spent on state of the art prisons while the schools were deteriorating. Brown-Dianis notes, “…in the last decade, zero tolerance has morphed into a broad sweeping set of hard disciplinary practices that exclude children from learning for a range of misbehaviors…” (Brown-Dianis, 2011, p. 25).

Brown-Dianis quotes from the Texas Education Agency that the number of student suspensions in Texas increased by 43 percent between 2002 and 2008. In Chicago, the number during the same time period quadrupled. In New York City, Brown-Dianis contends, school
suspensions increased 76% between 2000 and 2005, and most researchers agree the common element is the increase of SROs in public school hallways.

By 2013, the New York State Department of Education mandated several new policies. Schools were required to lock their doors and employ a greeter to admit visitors. Lockdown drills became required, like fire drills. During the drill, the doors are locked, lights are turned off, shades are drawn, and the class presses into the corner of the room adjacent to the door, so the intruder cannot see anyone in the room through the windows. Evie Blad wrote in *Education Week* a year after Sandy Hook, “Several states have increased mental health programs and mental illness recognition training for faculty and staff” (Blad, 2013, p. 5).

Blad notes that the crisis training became part of teacher certification in those few states, but the implication is that training for mental illness recognition and intervention are not widespread practices. The increased security measures have done little to assist in student behavior. Conversely, they make schools feel more like prisons. Increasing training for faculty and staff as Blad suggests makes sense, but locking the doors and hiding them in the corner are more cost effective.

Zero tolerance as a policy can be defined as mandatory sentencing for behavior that constitutes a crime. “Zero tolerance started as a prohibition against guns… In criminal law there are standards of intent and there are assumptions of innocence… Zero tolerance incorporates no such standards” (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001, pp. xii-xiii).

The federal government defines zero tolerance for weapons in the *Gun Free School Act*: “State[s] receiving federal funds… shall have in effect a state law requiring local educational agencies to expel from school for a period of not less than one year a student who is determined to have brought a weapon to school” (1994).
Mallett advances zero tolerance as overly intrusive:

These policies have eliminated the consideration by school administrators for why events occur, what motivates students’ involvement, and any mitigating history that impacted the event and led to the removal of students from school... often for first time offenders. (Mallett, 2016, p. 19)

The specter of violence in schools haunts educators, parents, and taxpayers, but zero tolerance policies, for Mallett, overreach the intended goal: “zero tolerance mandates predetermined consequences that are often severe and punitive… and deliver the message that no form of unacceptable behavior will be tolerated” (p. 19).

No Child Left Behind (2001) is a federal mandate that reauthorized zero tolerance: a student who brings a weapon to school will be removed for at least a year. There have been cases of youth unintentionally bringing a weapon to school, as one case speaks to a teenage student who drove his car to school (Pine Bush, NY, FreeRepublic.com). The boy was a Civil War re-enactor; a school security officer observed the butt of a musket (non-functioning), sticking out from under the boy’s uniform in the backseat of his car. The student was suspended for a year.

There have been cases of youth being punished having toy weapons: “… a five year old was suspended in Deer Lakes, Pennsylvania for wearing a five-inch plastic axe as part of his firefighters costume to a Halloween party…” (Schoonover, 2009, p. 16).

Zero-tolerance laws bind administrators’ hands with regard to making what should be common sense decisions. There is little room for interpretation of a student’s harmful intent; the government took the decision-making power away from administration. Schoonover quotes from Pott’s study from 2003:

Zero tolerance, as it relates to behavior and discipline, has been defined as ‘the policy or practice of not tolerating undesirable behavior, such as violence or illegal drug use, with the automatic imposition of severe penalties even for the first offense. (Potts, Njie, Detch, & Walton, 2003, p. 16)
This type of legislative over-reach exacerbates the conditions contributing to the school to prison pipeline. Principals, who are highly trained and educated, should have decision making powers over matters of discipline in their own schools, but when legislation mandates minimum consequences, that administrative power is curbed, and the rights of due process for the students are diminished; each case should be decided on its merits, not by a blanket policy.

**Criminalization of Student Behavior**

Zero-tolerance practices have been expanded in schools beyond incidents of violence. A culture of accountability has spread across American school culture, and zero tolerance and criminalization of student behavior happened as attempts to bring more control to the classroom because of flawed thinking. Orderly classes do not correlate to higher test scores. The literature reflects that if orderly classrooms mean student have been removed, then academic performance will actually diminish because the student who was removed from class is not removed from the academic record.

The margins for misbehavior have been blurred, and practical approaches toward school discipline were lost in zero tolerance, which standardized minimum consequences for behavior. Standardizing consequences led to the criminalization of student behavior because administrators were bound to those consequences. “Kids were being suspended or expelled for things like sharing a cough drop or a Midol capsule, or bringing a steak knife to cut a piece of lunchbox chicken…” (Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001, p. 8). The authors cite that these teens were suspended under zero tolerance regarding drug policies. The authors go on to describe other examples: a ten year old was suspended… for telling a girl she had large breasts, and a student in Texas was expelled and jailed for a Halloween essay with violent overtones.
Over time, support within the education community for zero tolerance gained ground under *No Child Left Behind* because schools and teachers were being evaluated on student performance, and the law removed troubled teens from the classroom (Schoonover, 2009). The author goes on to posit that removing troubled kids gives the impression to the community that school safety is taken seriously, and teachers no longer had to endure the behavior of disruptive students.

Annette Fuentes posited that President Bush followed President Clinton’s trajectory in legislating zero tolerance as a punitive approach to school security in her book, *Lockdown High: When the Schoolhouse Becomes the Jail House* (2011). Fuentes explains that after the incident at Columbine High School, on April 20, 1999, the Secret Service deemed school violence is a threat to national security, and working with the Department of Education, the Secret Service concluded school violence was targeted, not random. Fuentes outlines their conclusions:

- Incidents of targeted violence at school are rarely sudden, impulsive acts
- Prior to most incidents, other people knew about the attacker’s ideas and/or plan to attack
- Most attackers engaged in some behavior, prior to the incident, that caused concern or indicated a need for help
- Most attackers were known to have difficulty coping with significant losses or personal failures. Many had considered or attempted suicide
- Many attackers felt bullied, persecuted, or injured by others prior to the attack
- Most attackers had access to and had used weapons prior to the attacks.

(Fuentes, 2011, p. 37)

Fuentes asserts that these conclusions fostered the culture that promotes zero tolerance, as she cites then Governor George W. Bush: “Texas must have safe classrooms… we must adopt one policy for those who terrorize teachers or disrupt classrooms – zero tolerance” (p. 51). Fuentes further quotes from Governor Bush that schools will be “encouraged but not mandated to start ‘Tough Love Academies’… alternative schools where discipline and love go hand in hand” (p. }
Even as zero tolerance was coined as a policy, alternative setting placement was suggested but not required.

Fuentes explores the thinking of the architects of zero tolerance, whom she believes have fostered school environments that criminalize student behavior: “Tough rules are needed to keep schools safe” (Fuentes, 2011, p. 66). She remarks that they cite low rates of school violence as evidence of their success, asking, “…but that is tautological reasoning at its worst. If zero tolerance works, why are suspension rates and other disciplinary actions climbing?”

Fuentes cites Professor Russ Skiba of Indiana:

Principal’s attitudes and school suspensions are correlated: rates of out of school suspension were lower and the use of preventative measures more frequent, at schools whose principals believed that suspension and expulsion were unnecessary given a positive school climate. (p. 66)

For Fuentes, Skiba, and others in the canon, school culture is tantamount to student efficacy. In these settings, the traditional be good or be gone mentality drives certain students out, and the powers that be celebrate the controlled climate of their programs. Unless the government enacts sanctions against such a system for non-completion or poor graduation rates, the cycle continues.

The initial support for zero tolerance was short-lived, as educators began to see the overreaching consequences of frequent suspension. Fuentes writes:

…exclusion from school, whether by expulsion… or suspension creates for many students a vicious circle of failure that becomes more difficult to break as they get older. Once stigmatized as “troublemakers” students will continue to be viewed that way as they advance in grades… (p. 67)

Fuentes traces the path of youth at risk who enter the pipeline: “students suspended in elementary school struggle in middle school, find trouble in high school, and ultimately dropout.” (p. 67) Fuentes cites another section of Prof. Skiba’s research: “Across 37 states… Schools with high out-of-school suspension rates had lower achievement in eighth grade math,
writing, and reading… and higher juvenile incarceration rates” (p. 68). Fuentes considers why disciplinarians in schools with orderly operations, but low academic achievement and high suspension and incarceration rates, cannot see past the need for order. Over time, educators did begin to see these trends, but few schools sought alternate settings or other solutions. Fuentes postulates some ideas for alternative tactics for resolving conflicts and providing a peaceful learning environment:

…conflict resolution… social and emotional learning, which includes meditation and negotiation, communicating clearly and active listening, understanding and expressing feelings, and valuing diversity to counter prejudice… are keys to creating a safe learning environment.” (p. 187)

Fuentes, however, does not explore alternative educational settings in her study, but her conclusions about criminalizing student behavior resonate. For Fuentes, public opinion has reached a critical mass because across the nation teachers, parents, and community members see that zero tolerance as not addressing their needs, particularly as more schools faced the realities of being label school in need of improvement.

“American schools increasingly define and manage the problem of student discipline through a prism of crime and control” (Hirschfield, 2008, p. 79). Rutgers professor Paul Hirschfield defines criminalization of student behavior as having a “rich history.” He states that:

…most legislative responses to school deviance do not codify new crimes… rather legal reforms mandate that illegal behaviors are referred to police. Other policies stipulate that students are treated like actual criminals or suspected criminals by subjecting them to in-school suspension, scrutiny by armed police, dogs, and metal detectors.” (Hirschfield, 2008, p. 80)

The logic is that students placed in environments that treat them like criminals will assume the role. This circular issue reverberates with the theory of criminalization of student behavior.
Hirschfield notes that judicial decisions in the 1960s and 1970s “increasingly sought to curb the arbitrary application of exclusionary school punishments” (p. 86).

The court rulings, however, had the reverse effect. Ultimately, school officials became wary of litigation, which “expanded the role of police and the juvenile court in school discipline, limiting the involvement of school personnel reduces their vulnerability to litigation” (p. 86).

Hirschfield cites Boylan, et al. (2002): “National teachers unions and national principal associations were major stakeholders in the creation of zero-tolerance laws” (p. 86). Because school districts faced lawsuits for what was deemed unnecessarily heavy disciplinary action, and administrators were personally named, Hirschfield argues, school officials opted to submit parcels of school authority to legislators.

Hirschfield draws parallels in structuring school policies and practices to officials in urban settings who build stable infrastructure around the control of crime. Hirschfield draws political connections between politicians who fund prisons through “expansionist justice policies” and politicians who draft exclusionary school policies, with the support of national teachers’ and administrators’ organizations. Hirschfield argues the theory that exclusionary school policies help to keep prisons full, noting that ‘lockdown environments’ in schools warehouse “disposable youth” (p. 90), directly implying that youths who get into trouble in school enter juvenile justice as a precursor for adult prison. “Urban mayors and [urban] superintendents have little incentive to invest in genuine educational opportunities for unexceptional students trapped in under-performing schools” (p. 90).

Compounding this position, Hirschfield asserts politicians and school officials maintain an “inter-institution communication by adopting best practices [for] school security professionals” (p. 91). Hirschfield posits that, “School security consultants are rooted
professionally and help to situate school misconduct within the purview of criminal justice” (p. 91).

For Hirschfield, the strategy to reverse it lies in “…confronting school environments that weight penological imperatives and images more heavily than pedagogical ones…” He calls this the empirical question that deserves “systematic attention” (p. 95).

Volumes of literature provide overwhelming evidence supporting the theories that criminalization of student behavior, zero tolerance, and police/SRO presence in schools feed the school to prison pipeline. There is a body of literature, however, that supports the hopeful notion that change is looming.

**Resistance to Change**

Thomas Mowen, John Brent, and John Bowman conducted a 2020 study entitled *The Effect of School Discipline on Offending across Time*. The dependent variable was youth at risk, and the independent variable was school suspension. They drew connections between school discipline and what they call a life-course context:

Fair and consistent school discipline can promote pro-social outcomes for adolescents… On the other hand, researchers have tied the use of exclusionary and punitive discipline practices to increased grade retention, decreased educational outcomes, increased perceptions of racial/ethnic inequality, heightened levels of anxiety and stress, low participation … decreased civic engagement… and deterioration of the broader school climate. (Mowen, Brent, & Bowman, 2020, pp. 740-741)

Veteran school employees recognize the points that Mowen, et al. explore. There are instances of students who find themselves in trouble who never do so again, but the researchers propose a new term, *cumulative disadvantage*, or the concept of discipline and offending across time. The authors propose a chicken and the egg metaphor: “Individuals who commit delinquency are also likely to be suspended, resulting in difficulty disentangling causal ordering” (p. 743). This
suggests, like the metaphor, delinquency leads to discipline, but discipline fosters more
delinquency.

Mowen and his group state that suspension “as a turning point that triggers within person
changes over time… the cumulative effect of suspension on the offending student (p. 744). After
analyzing their data, Mowen, et al., report that the statistical analysis “indicates that students who
were suspended once were likely to report being suspended again” (p. 746). Their data further
suggest that over time, as discipline accumulates, there comes a point when even “family bonds
are no long significantly related to offending after accounting for … cumulative effect of
suspension” (p. 751). Mowen, et al, expand on the impact of the cumulative disadvantage by
making a connection to the prison pipeline theory: “suspensions may fundamentally alter
trajectories of offending across time… trajectories into and through adulthood” (p. 753). They
conclude, “intensification of disciplinary strategies may counterproductively increase offending
behavior” (p 754). Though the authors recognize they cannot recommend abandoning
exclusionary school discipline, they don’t posit a broad spectrum of alternatives.

The authors of the study do present one solution to the cumulative disadvantage effect of
suspension: Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies. Since even the bonds of the family are
not enough after an accumulation of suspensions, the authors do suggest that it is vital for
students to make connections with teachers and have positive experiences in school. The factors
that helped them to build bonds at school were “… if they felt safe at school, whether teachers
were interested in them, if school discipline was fair, if they liked school, and whether students
were graded fairly” (p. 747). They marginally support the theory, while acknowledging the
limitations of their study and data set. “PBIS programs have received considerable attention and
have been shown to reduce school suspensions as well as offending… unfortunately, we were unable to examine the effect of PBIS on offending …” (p. 754).

This study is important because the authors recognize that suspension, particularly as discipline accumulates, causes more disciplinary behavior and further suspension. This theory highlights how the cultural shift began to happen. Educators took notice of the recidivism rates of youth who exhibit defiance in the face of discipline. The exclusionary practices were not working, and educators began to notice.

The Changing Tide

Some schools have started to embrace change. Over time, support for zero-tolerance policies has begun to erode within the education community and education researchers. Some stakeholders have started to explore alternatives.

The failure of zero tolerance policies to keep guns out of school 13 years after the implementation of the Gun-Free Schools Act has led some educational leaders to question their continued viability as more cases are exposed of non-violent children being expelled or sent to juvenile detention facilities. (Schoonmaker, 2009, p. 61)

Zero-tolerance policies were having little effect in decreasing school violence; rather, there were increases in the incidents of student suspension or removal for lesser offenses. Parents began to question the existence of zero-tolerance policies, questioning politicians why such policies were reauthorized.

…policymakers, educators and parents should be very concerned with the long-term implications of denying educational opportunities to millions of children, particularly when the effectiveness of these policies in ensuring school safety is highly suspect. (Blumenson, 2003, p. 18)

Zero-tolerance policies criminalizes student behavior, which frequently turned the matters over to the juvenile justice, but the courts were starting to consider the constitutionality of long-term suspensions.
On one interpretation, finding a constitutional right to a certain level of educational services would contradict the Court's view that there is no "affirmative right to Governmental aid, even where such aid may be necessary to secure life, liberty, or property interests of which the government itself may not deprive the individual.” (Blumenson, 2003, p. 24)

Common sense approaches and collaboration between policy makers, school leaders, child advocates, and parents to prevent depriving individuals of their educational rights are crucial. There must be a balance between the rights of other students the offending youth, who, by suspension, have their rights deprived. Prior disciplinary history, exploration of intent, and providing due process rather than mandatory suspensions have mitigated some of the impact of zero-tolerance legislation. Across the country, legislators and departments of education modified zero-tolerance policies. Alternative Educational Settings are increasingly becoming the answer.

It is not uncommon… for violent children to be removed from the regular classroom setting so as to protect the other children. The dilemma then becomes a question of where to place these children who could still benefit from an educational opportunity… Many school districts have invested their money in creating alternative educational settings. (Schoonmaker, 2009, pp. 59-60)

Schoonmaker goes on to describe the Alt Ed settings as differing in range from separate buildings to dedicated classrooms within a school, but he emphasizes the critical lack of Alt Ed settings in examining the US Department of Education report: “Less than 35% of all expelled youth have the opportunity to attend an alternative educational setting” (p. 60). That percentage means 65% of suspended teens are deprived of their rights to an education.

A common thread within the literature explores what happens when school discipline lands in the courthouse. Richard Arum introduced the phrase, “adversarial legalism” in his 2003 book Judging School Discipline. Arum states that the cost of the legal challenges to school discipline affected the institutions and promulgated organizational policies and practices that
were less harsh. Zero tolerance started in the legislative branches of government with new laws driving administrative action on misbehavior, but its end started in the courts. Parents began to bring suit to restore their children to school.

Legal challenges undermined the legitimacy of a school’s moral authority… schools were likely to reduce their disciplinary responses to student misbehavior while… students became less willing to accept a school’s authority or discipline as legitimate. (Arum, 2003, p. 13)

Arum believes that these legal challenges reduce a school’s willingness to engage in “disciplinary responses to misbehavior.” If a court overturns a suspension, the financial consequences, primarily legal fees and settlements, could be very disruptive to the annual budget the taxpayers bear the burden of maintaining. Arum posits:

The effectiveness of school discipline and the related capacity of schools to socialize youth for a constructive role in society was even more threatened by the extent to which ‘adversarial legalism’ undermined the legitimacy and moral authority of schools as institutions. (p. 14)

Arum cites in the Supreme Court, *Case Goss v. Lopez* (1975): “Rudimentary due process” was established for short-term suspension (p. 14), so, by proxy, long-term suspension requires full due process, as the protected right to an education is at stake. Arum elaborates, “…courts altered the rules whereby schools had the authority to control misbehavior, and school discipline correspondingly became less effective” (p. 27). In response to adversarial legalism, school administrators measured their responses. If courts were favorable toward administrative decisions, the school community deemed the management of discipline as fair. Where courts were more hostile toward administrative decisions, discipline was perceived to be unfair. In cases where the courts found unfavorably for schools, school leaders were pushed to look for alternative solutions to student misbehavior.
Across the country, zero-tolerance policies have softened. In 2014, President Obama’s Department of Education issued a “Dear Colleague” letter that addressed a myriad of flaws with zero tolerance. The letter did not replace statues like NCLB, SAVE, or the Gun Free Zone Act, but it underscored the changing tone in the country toward zero tolerance and his administration’s expectation for more judicious approaches to school discipline. Changing the pattern of school discipline leading to criminal processing, however, requires a shift in mindset of school officials.

In their 2005 study, Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson observed that schools with positive cultural atmospheres provide the hope for breaking the pipeline with the following quotes. “Academic failure, exclusionary discipline practices, and dropout have been identified as key elements in a ‘school to prison pipeline.’” (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2005, p. 69). Positive school characteristics are crucial in disrupting the school to prison pipeline. “Schools can provide protective factors by offering a positive and safe learning environment, setting high yet achievable academic and social expectations, and facilitating academic and social success” (p. 70). Longitudinal studies have shown that low school achievement predicts delinquency. “Eighty-two percent of the adult prison population and 85% of the juvenile justice cases were high school dropouts (p. 70).

A common thread through the literature is the recipe for delinquency and failure: academic failure, suspension, and dropout are related to student demographic characteristics. In this study, however, the researchers discovered that characteristics of positive school climate, clean physical conditions of a school, and active involvement of the faculty who maintain high expectations for their students were effective measures against student non-completion, or dropout; the authors posit these to be effective, even when poverty is a factor.
In their correlative analysis, Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson found data familiar to the other studies common in the research:

Law violations, retention rates, and dropout rates were positively correlated to suspension rate… indicating that [schools] with students from low socioeconomic backgrounds reported higher rates of suspension…” (Christle, et al 2005, p. 76)

Their qualitative analysis using staff surveys demonstrated the pathways to change:

… consistent and positive [attitude] with regard to having clear and high academic and behavioral expectations for students, having strategies for keeping them involved and connected to school, having a good school climate, and having good family involvement.” (p. 76)

The study explored the beliefs of administrators who saw school climate as good, but they still felt the need to explore ways to reduce dropout. School climate and positive attitudes among the professionals were key factors in their findings. By contrast, they found the opposite in schools with high non-completion rates: law violations, high retention rates, undesirable physical conditions, and infrequent adult-student interactions that led to high suspension rates and high dropout rates. They noted a statistical correlation between increasing crime rates and decreasing graduation rates in schools lacking these positive characteristics. Citing Furlong and Morrison 2000, Christle, Jolivette, and Nelson demonstrate their findings:

…that schools can provide protective factors by providing a positive and safe learning environment, setting high yet achievable academic and social expectations, facilitating academic and social success… positive perceptions of school, family involvement… frequent adult-student interactions, and [high] number of instructional strategies… may overcome the negative impact of poverty. (p. 81)

Though noted throughout the literature, Christle et al. cite Skiba and Peterson 1999, “…broadened zero tolerance policies have only negative effects on student behavior and school climate” (p. 81). In their studies, Christle, et al. found that “Attendance rate was negatively
correlated to academic failure, suspension, and dropout…” but their conclusions, which they cited as being similar to Mulvey and Cauffman, 2001 founds that “… findings support the observation that students who feel a sense of belonging and are connected to school are less likely to fail, be suspended, or dropout of school.” Christle, et al. further found that “low risk schools as being cleaner, brighter, and providing relaxed decor” (p. 84).

Disrupting the school to prison pipeline requires changing legislation mandating minimum consequences for behavior, which was encouraged under former President Obama with Arne Duncan’s letter. The mindset of educators, however, must move away from zero tolerance and exclusionary disciplinary practices toward creating a culture of inclusion. To reduce delinquency, youth need to feel connected, and they need to have a stake in the rules and culture of the school. Schools must partner with communities and families to develop relationships where they feel connected to teachers who are invested in them, who employ a diverse pedagogical techniques to reach diverse learning styles. The cultural atmosphere must be reflected in the physical appearance, cleanliness, and welcoming feel of the school. Cultural change begins with PBIS. If they feel connected to and valued by their teachers, they are less likely to act out, be suspended, dropout, and perpetuate the circular culture of the pipeline.

**PBIS and Mindfulness**

Behavioral science as required teacher education curricula was the topic of the National Research Council’s agenda for their meeting in Washington D.C. in 2011. As early as 2010, the Division of Behavioral and Social Sciences and Education was advocating for the development of pathways to strengthen the inclusion of behavioral science in teacher education curricula. (Educational Researcher, 2011) At that time, researchers and practitioners alike were lamenting scarce materials and the limited contact among or limited or access to the practitioners in the
state and the scientific community. They sought the integration of behavioral science in teacher preparation programs across the country. Over time, Positive Behavior Improvement Strategies (PBIS), and behavioral science developed rapidly. Non-completion was recognized as a public health concern:

> High school dropouts were up to four times more likely to experience individual negative outcomes (being arrested, fired, or on government assistance, using illicit substances, having poor health) by age 27 years and 24 times more likely compared to graduates to experience as many as four or more negative outcomes. (Landsford, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 2016, p. 652)

The researchers included incarceration and termination from employment as examples of negative outcomes. Health concerns and shortened life-expectancy were more serious negative outcomes of non-completion. People with better education find jobs in life with better income and health benefits. They can afford better housing in safer neighborhoods, healthier food, and better health care for their children. “Estimates suggest that promoting education to reduce health disparities could save eight times more lives than could be saved through medical advances in drugs and devices” (Landsford, et al., 2016, p. 653).

The researchers performed a longitudinal study of 585 families in urban settings in Tennessee and Indiana. Families signed up for the study, so subjects ranged from kindergarten through adults in their late 20’s. Using descriptive statistics, the researchers discovered that participants who did not complete school were twice as likely to be terminated from employment, twice as likely to use illicit drugs, and four times as likely to be on government assistance, than their peers who earned a diploma. Findings in similar studies led researchers to consider means of keeping all students through to successfully completion of school.

Programs that implement School Wide Positive Behavior Improvement Strategies (SWPBIS) report notable success. Such strategies include clearly defining, teaching, and
reinforcing school-wide expectations; using data-based decision-making to monitor implementation and results; providing differentiated levels of support for them in response to student need; and establishing systems to support ongoing implementation (Freeman, Simonsen, McCoach, Sugai, Lombardi, & Horner, 2015). Results of the study led to the conclusion that if a framework is implemented with fidelity, teens will have early access to support. Freeman, et al. state:

… Given that dropping out is often the result of a long process of disengagement, a systematic tiered and preventative approach to improving school climate risk factors seem particularly applicable to address the drop out problem. (p. 293)

Freeman’s strategies have merit, in that providing differentiated levels of support for students and establishing preventative systems to support ongoing implementation are vital in school, and would be particularly instrumental in alternative settings. Those who have not found success in the traditional programs would arguably require greater levels of differentiation of support, and that level of support would have to be on-going for alternatively-placement youth to prevent dropout. If graduation is the goal, then what Freeman and others present as preventative must become prescriptive in the alternative setting.

The consequences for leaving school before completion are well documented:

… individuals who drop out of school before twelfth grade have much poorer adult outcomes in the labor market… and are involved in more criminal activity and are more frequently arrested than individuals who finish high school… data show that median weekly earnings for employed males with high school degrees but no college are over 40% higher than such earnings for employed male dropouts. (Bjerk, 2012, p.110)

Bjerk explains what he sees as differences between reasons for dropping out as pull or push reasons. Pulled-out-of-school reasons include taking care of a family member with a health issue, working a family business, or working in some other industry because of economic need.
He describes pushed-out-of-school reasons as a dislike for school or removal for suspension or expulsion. Bjerk suggests that the difference between the reasons has some impact:

There is evidence that those who had an active plan for what they are going to do after dropping out – i.e. those who felt pulled out of school—do better than those who did not have an active plan for what to do after dropping out – i.e., those who felt pushed out of school. (p. 111)

Though Bjerk posits that those who drop out for a pull reason fare better, his data for both types of reasons, show hardship. Bjerk explains in his study the differences in fiduciary consequences between completing and not completing high school for any reason: “High school dropouts indeed have substantially worse labor market and criminal participation outcomes than high school completers on all of the outcome dimensions examined here” (p. 113).

Applying the concept of push and pull, schools should create alternative settings for those who are unsuccessful in the traditional program; instead of pushing them out for suspension and discipline, pushing them into an alternative program that leads to completion would potentially resolve the draw to criminal participation. Perhaps a student being pulled to drop out by the need for work or a family need could be pulled into an alternative setting, if the setting could have flexible hours or a non-traditional structure. Alternative settings may pull the student into an environment where success is more likely. Similarly, students pushed out for discipline could be pushed into an alternative setting that better meets their needs.

Engagement of SWPBIS is necessary to capture students before they drop out, and mindfulness is a strong positive behavior intervention strategy toward that goal. “School failure is prevalent for many… and is compounded by drug use, sexual involvement, school trouble, and delinquency” (Wisner & Norton, 2013, p. 207). The authors state, “Meditation practices typically incorporate cognitive aspects such as keeping an open attitude and behavioral aspects
such as the use of a particular posture” (p. 211). After a brief definition of mindfulness, Wisner and Norton establish the need for alternative approaches to alternative setting: “…at risk youth often participate in [behavior] that identify them as requiring specialized attention not available in traditional school environments (p. 209).

At risk students are at higher risk for health concerns, more so than their peers in traditional classrooms: substance abuse, suicidal ideation, involvement in risky behaviors regarding sex and/or violence. These behaviors may be the reason that the youth have been placed in alternative settings, so if the behaviors are not addressed, the likelihood for further failure is high. For these reasons, Wisner and Norton report, “Alternative schools offer intensive teacher support in both academic and personal spheres, flexible rules… and intensive psychological support” (p. 209).

Mindfulness as a positive behavior intervention strategy, by design reduces depression and anxiety, reduces sleep disturbances, and promotes self-awareness. Wisner and Norton (2013) argue:

School-based counseling groups that utilize mindfulness may be particularly helpful in alternative school settings, in which innovative practices are used to help students succeed… potential [exists] to address physical, emotional, biological, learning, and self-esteem challenges. (Wisner & Norton, 2013, pp. 211-212)

Wisner and Norton performed a study through the University of Texas on 28 students with behavioral and emotional concerns. They ran descriptive statistics on their data, using ANOVA and T tests, and they discerned, “There was statistically significant difference in the scores before and after the intervention with an increase in behavioral and emotional strengths evident following the intervention” (p. 211). Their remarks concluded with the assertion that mindfulness is an important counseling intervention because it has the potential to improve “psychosocial, cognitive, and behavioral strength of adolescents” (p. 212).
If school personnel were more broadly trained in mental health strategies and treatments, if schools were to invest in alternative setting education, youth at risk may be reached. These would lead to meaningful school reform that improves the lives of these kids, which in turn would improve the performance of the school district.

**Barriers and Impediments to Implementing Alt Ed Programs**

A review of relevant literature reveals the impediments that prevent districts from providing meaningful alternative setting instruction for students with disciplinary and/or school avoidance issues. The main concern is equity: A student removed from the traditional program is still entitled to an education, and, “If there are inconsistencies between meaningful learning experiences for at risk youth and performance-based standards outcomes… issues around equity and alternative schools should be evaluated” (Hemmer, Madsen, & Torres, 2012, p. 655). Providing appropriate educational opportunity is a pressing obligation for educators, particularly if the student offender is of compulsory school age; the behavior may require removal from the public school classroom to provide for general safety of all, but such removal does not abdicate the offenders’ rights to an education.

Creating opportunities that are separate and appropriate is difficult, and expensive, but schools are under the legal impetus to provide them instruction; most districts provide home tutoring, which is costly and marginally effective at best when compared with a traditional classroom setting. No one tutor is qualified nor has the knowledge of what multiple teachers present in classrooms every day, nor does a private home have the requisite equipment, computers, laboratories, gymnasiums, libraries, and the like. Through the obligation to provide equitable instruction to the youth at risk, some districts provide alternative setting education in a brick and mortar space, but this type of setting is rare.
The associated costs of alternative setting programs, Alt Ed, face intense scrutiny. Taxpayers, parents, school personnel, and all stakeholders want to observe the progress for those being educated in these costly settings. They want assurances that the education provided is worth the fiduciary expenditures for buildings, curricula materials, salaries, and transportation. As such, the two biggest barriers to the existence of alternative education programs in public schools are buy-in and funding.

Research shows that where there is support for Alt Ed programs, the funding follows, so the primary impediment is buy-in, or support for the program, both from the public and from within the school faculty and staff. School budgets are tight, and non-mandated programs are often cut in difficult financial climates, which presents another barrier: lacking government mandates for Alt Ed instruction. School officials often do not prioritize the allocation of funds for marginalized populations. Prevailing attitudes in school communities regarding at-risk youth, those who cause trouble -- garner little sympathy, and remove them from the school population, particularly since the SAVE Act and NCLB.

Removal has become the dominant practice. Combined with the lack of adequate alternative instruction, these students become marginalized, and that leads to non-completion. Other impediments to creating and maintaining successful Alt Ed settings for youth at risk are real. For those programs that exist and are working, the philosophy is modest: if stakeholders believe in a program, they will fund it.

Accountability has become a barrier that affects support, or buy-in. Closely related to equity, accountability comes from State Ed mandates, tax-payer expectations, and school boards who create policy and budgets. Stakeholders and government officials want to see them meet high standards to justify the expenditures. A primary reason a district will allocate limited
resources for an Alt Ed setting is accountability. The State Education Department and the public demand high graduation rates, and youth at risk disproportionately become non-completers. Accountability has two edges: Boards of education want improved graduation rates, so they spend money on Alt Ed settings. If a program is not producing high academic standards, however, then buy-in/support diminishes.

The expansion of alternative education globally has coincided with a shift toward greater accountability for ensuring educational access and opportunity, high academic standards, and increased graduation rates… in theory, [sic] would not differentiate neighborhoods, schools, or students, thus ensuring equity and opportunity (Hemmer et al, 2015, p 655)

Historically, alternative programs were created because administration and boards of education recognize the need to establish orderly class settings while still determined to educate the disruptive to preserve their graduation rates, but early on Alt Ed settings were recognized as ineffective and expensive, as one study Hemmer concluded in 2012:

By the 1980’s, with increased concern for school safety, school districts and state legislatures created “pseudo alternative schools (Escobar-Chaves et al 2002) During the same time, alternative education expanded to include dropouts, teenage parents, and students with vocational or career aspirations in many respects, these schools were alternatives in name only and represented ineffective and often punitive approaches that isolated, stigmatized, and segregated difficult children from the main-stream, traditional schools. (p. 657)

The Hemmer study explored accountability policies in alternative programs in five schools in California and Texas; she reports that by 2008, 1.2 million students in America were dropping out of high school, so alternative programs were “packaged as unique solutions that districts can use to improve the quality of education for at-risk students” (p. 657). Hemmer cites a Miller article (2004) who posited that “most of these students experience physical or emotional abuse, neglect, or abandonment; live under the poverty line; have poor support systems, poor grades, and live in high crime environments” (p. 657).
The educators Hemmer studied recognized the need for Alt Ed settings, and some made efforts to build programs, but Hemmer notes the barriers of poverty, repeating systems of abuse or neglect, the reality of their lives were of themselves barriers beyond the control of the school. Districts attempted to surmount the problems, to mixed success.

Historically, Alt Ed schools that were created and had high accountability, particularly after the No Child Left Behind act, because stakeholders want evidence of growth: improved grades, better attendance and rising graduation rates that can be measured and published. Accountability drives policy, and policy implementation is a barrier.

Teachers and administrators resist change by nature, particularly when the new idea conflicts with commonly held beliefs, i.e., what to do with belligerent children? The idea of be good or be gone is a common theme, but this notion shows how accountability and buy-in can cut both ways: governmental policy calls for improved graduation rates, local beliefs about disruption in the classroom cause resistance to spending resources on Alt Ed settings, but stakeholders recognize the legal expectation to improve school performance, one major indicator of which is graduation rates. “Under federal accountability, alternative schools are treated like all other schools. However, technical constraints such as high mobility and low enrollment may limit full application of accountability” (Hemmer, et al., 2012, p. 662). Hemmer notes that some schools manage to build financial support for infrastructure, meaning developing Alt Ed settings in separate facilities for at risk youth is possible. Managing such programs requires a moral imperative, or someone who believes in the cause.

In one of the schools in Hemmer’s study, administration found creative ways around several barriers. They rented space in a vacant strip mall and remodeled the space to create learning spaces. This was far cheaper than building a dedicated space. A second example,
administration in several buildings faced the accountability hurdle by appealing to State Ed when scores fell below standards for Adequate Yearly Progress, or AYP. State Ed has granted appeals in such cases, which keeps programs that don’t make sufficient progress operational, but they found that this fed other barriers: “Programs have a reputation as being a throw away campus, with throw away kids and throw away teachers” (p. 666). Public support or buy-in diminished when accountability measures reveal a lack of equity in progress or success, which placed a strain on the administration and school board to justify the fiduciary expenditures.

Some stakeholders define success with graduation rates, while others look to see actual changes in individual behavior and student growth. Schools that manage to build support or buy-in often provide alternative instruction to develop that support within stakeholder groups to justify the financial burden. Keeping the programs going, however, is a difficult and complex process. Hemmer and others note that models that incorporate SWPBIS, including counseling, and mindfulness, are more equipped to answer questions about accountability. Hemmer argues, “It takes redesign of the organization, staffing, and curriculum. Teachers learn more hands-on approaches, with teachers serving as facilitators and not lecturers” (p. 668).

Building community and faculty/administrative support requires overcoming stereotypes and long-held beliefs. Hemmer’s conclusions demonstrate that collaborative efforts between the stakeholders are required to “… move schools toward equitable education that is inclusive, relevant, and democratic. Policy makers must press school leaders to build capacity for data driven instructional practices” (p. 668). Improvement beyond graduation rate alone, growth that demonstrates behavioral changes and appropriate social engagement, requires educator determination, innovation, and dedication to the process.
McDaniel, Jolivette, and Ennis conducted a study on two Alt Ed settings in the Southeast. They explored barriers and SWPBIS to measure the success of the programs. They specifically sought descriptors defining failure/lack of success of programs because, “Behavioral deficits lead to negative outcomes in the school and post school years… including academic failure, placement in restrictive settings, and school dropout” (McDaniel, Jolivette, & Ennis, 2012, p. 247). This study examined barriers to success of programs rather than the existence of programs themselves, but programs that fail raise questions about the impediments explored earlier: reduced buy-in, reduced funding, and equity resulting from poor assessment.

The study explored circumstances that led students to Alt Ed settings, specifically:

…school disciplinary policies that mandate suspension, expulsion, and referral to more restrictive placement or to the police for… increasing array of classroom rule infractions… as an avenue supporting the school to prison pipeline phenomenon…highlighting: students who are failing academically, failing socially, present challenging behaviors during school, are of certain ethnic groups, and/or have disabilities. (p. 248)

The first barrier to student success explored in this study, which ultimately could lead to a substantial barrier to the existence of the program, was a lack of a unified universal tier of support in the first school they examined. Social workers, counselors, intervention plans were readily available in the program, but a lack of unification was evident in the lack of staff development and training towards a central plan of action for dealing with disruption. Lack of staff development as a barrier to success was defined by a lack of clear administrative support and a lack of problem-solving capacity among staff.

The solution was presented as a need for school-wide data analysis to see what behaviors were happening and why, and staff training in SWPBIS, particularly a team-based problem-solving approach to provide staff and students with coping tools. McDaniel described the issue
as a “disjointed universal model,” because even when SWPBIS was implemented, it was done so inconsistently, and they attempted to incorporate it in the existing management system. It is difficult to adopt the best elements of SWPBIS while still following the model of suspension, expulsion, and exclusion. Staff resistance (buy-in), and disorganized administrative efforts deflated the efforts to create universal, school-wide objectives and failed to address individualized behavior objectives.

One teacher’s frustration was noted, “…either we’re committed to a particular management system or we’re not” (McDaniel, et al., 2012, p. 251). Success, it was concluded, would only be found with the universal adaptation of SWPBIS, including consistent problem solving and teamwork. Overcoming the barriers of a lack of training and a lack of a unified plan can only be resolved through overt training and deliberately developing a plan that is shared by all stakeholders.

School-wide data analysis and a consistent vision are tantamount to a successful program, as found in the second school examined in the McDaniel study. McDaniel, et al, posited that a lack of clear local policy and a lack of training were poor foundations for developing a successful Alt Ed setting, and the schools they studied created their programs in response to state policies and poor performance on assessments. They described this school formed success where failure had existed by creating what they called school fit. Local policy and training resolved issues of resistance to change, a significant barrier.

Having stakeholders engaged in the development of policy and engaged in training engenders school-wide buy-in. Consistency is crucial: a lack of fidelity to the agreed upon SWPBIS measures, or failing to modify them to meet the existing behavior policies, may cause employees to abandon the effort, as observed in the schools McDaniel et al. studied. An on-
going process led by administration focused on clear goals and providing support to foster
dedication and perseverance in the staff. They found that analysis of individual student data of
success and of referral incidents must be used to measure that success, which is success beyond
graduation rates. By measuring smaller increments of success, stakeholders, including the youth,
can feel the effort was successful. Young people will see measurable results in themselves. The
study concluded that with a clear plan, proper training of faculty and staff, and implementation
of interventions to negative student behavior, specifically having a proactive and preventative
approach to school discipline, may be appropriate means to minimize the continued involvement
in the school to prison pipeline.

The Hemmer and McDaniel studies had commonalities in their findings of the barrier to
Alt Ed settings, and both studies had similar approaches to success.

Summary: Disrupting the Pipeline

The purpose of this study is to explore the efficacy of alternative settings for at risk youth
removed from the traditional school setting, and another purpose is to determine why there are
not more programs, as some have proven to be successful. Such programs do exist. Sara Carr
wrote a 2015 article in The Atlantic titled, “How Strict is Too Strict?” She explores the backlash
against no-excuse discipline in high schools by writing about a cohort of new schools in the New
Orleans post-Katrina charter schools experiment: Carver Collegiate Academy and Cohen College
Prep were among those she studied. Ben Kleban, CEO of the charter school cohort, was
concerned with the two-tiered education system that had arisen in the city prior to the
experiment. At Carver, “Low-level misbehavior led to 50% suspension rates, a pathway to prison
rather than college” (theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2014/12/how-strict-is-too-strict/382228/).
Carr noted that Kleban was particularly concerned with Cohen Prep, where the suspension rate was 62%.

Kleban instituted a town-hall style meeting circuit in which students could contribute their feelings about everything, but in particular about the rules and fairness. “There is a value in being consistent, and the no-excuses and zero-tolerance approaches have the benefit of clear-cut implementation, a tidy matrix or rules” (theatlantic.com). Kleban, however, did not hold with that implementation philosophy. He held the town hall meetings to hammer out compromises, so they did not feel as though something was being done to them and they didn’t understand why. They needed to feel included, and Kleban believed in getting to know them personally and developing customized discipline plans when appropriate.

One student remarked, “They meet us halfway. Sometimes it is as simple as talking less and listening more” (theatlantic.com). Kleban notes that he still struggles with balance between structure and flexibility, but by 2014, suspensions had fallen 37%.

Carr visited another school in New Orleans that was modeling a similar approach. In that school, officials noted a significant decrease in suspensions and the development of a sense of school community. The goal of suspension as last resort was adopted, and, similar to what happened at Cohen, suspension rates dwindled. One benefit of the improved school climate: they’ve dramatically increased staff retention. The school had cycled through five principals in recent years; two were interim. Young and idealistic staff rotated through the system, leaving little stability. Once they adopted a school as a community approach, things stabilized, but it was a process:

… [we] explored an array of alternatives, from partnerships with juvenile-justice groups in the city to “restorative justice” strategies that get students talking through problems rather than simply paying penalties. The new ethos will require “relationships being very clearly built” and “love being very clearly expressed… School disciplinarians have failed
to cultivate a shared sense of direction and the trust that goes with it. When that happens… even the most well-intentioned system can end up feeling like a “blind application of the rules.” (theatlantic.com)

Providing alternative settings with customized programming to meet the educational needs of those who cannot manage themselves in the traditional school setting should be a moral imperative. Providing an alternative setting should be educational law. Until it is law, school officials when examining the cost to benefit analysis of such programs should consider their opportunity costs: an Alt Ed setting program designed to educate obstinate students, even for a few years is more economically sound than providing for their incarcerations in adult prisons.

Chapter II presented research on exclusionary discipline practices that stem from failed zero-tolerance policies. The criminalization of student behavior, which leads to exclusion, failure, dropout or expulsion, otherwise known as non-completion was explored. Several studies about the changing tide of how educational philosophy are seen as moving away from zero tolerance toward School-Wide Positive Behavioral Intervention Strategies, including successful Alternative Education settings employing intervention strategies like mindfulness and present a plausible means to disrupt the school to prison pipeline because they stay in school, which improves the likelihood that they will complete their education. Chapter III will explore the methodology that used to conduct the interviews and gather data. Chapter IV will present the data gathered during the interviews thematically, and Chapter V will present analysis of the data collected from three Alternative Education schools found in New York.
CHAPTER III: METHODOLOGY

Data Methodology

The methodology for this study is explored in Chapter III. The research questions, instruments of measuring data, data analysis techniques, research design, population and sampling methods will be explored. A qualitative study will be outlined for examining the efficacy of alternative education settings with regard to students who have been removed from the traditional setting. The purpose of this study was to examine how alternative educational settings for violent or disruptive youth can help them find success and disrupt the school to prison pipeline, and secondly to explore why there aren’t more programs.

Consideration was given to the success of three regional programs: success defined as improved graduation rates by their respective administrations. Consideration of the administrations’ perceptions of the cost benefit analysis of their programs was explored. This researcher also explored why these educators believe there are not more programs, perhaps one in every school in New York. The impediments to starting and maintain an alternative program was a major focus of this study.

Research Questions

As stated in Chapter I, the following four research questions drive the inquiry to better understand what elements impact the school to prison pipeline.

RQ1: What is involved in creating an Alternative Setting environment for youth at risk who struggle to find success in traditional settings?

RQ2: What are the impediments to establishing Alt Ed programs, and how do the benefits outweigh the barriers?

RQ3: How do educators define success in Alternative Education Settings?
RQ4: Why are there not more Alternative Education programs operating in public schools today?

The researcher has created an inventory of questions for conducting interviews with administration at the three schools hosting Alt Ed setting programs. The data in the responses were triangulated, and a conceptual map of the answers was created, exploring the successes and failures of each program in search of commonalities in the landscapes of the answers.

The programs have existed for many years in each district, so the administration considers the costs to benefit financially appropriate. One of the districts is categorized as a city school district, so it receives additional funding for being an urban setting. Another is suburban, and the third is rural. Administration in the three schools maintain their programs within their operating budgets, meaning there are no additional sources of funding for these programs, like grants. The administrators credit their programs to improving district-wide graduation rates. This study attempts to identify why these districts, unlike their neighboring schools, fund their programs, and administrators in these school districts will share how they overcame the barriers to establishing their programs.

**Research Design**

The foundation of this study uses qualitative analysis of three case studies. Qualitative analysis was chosen for this study as the best vehicle for examining the merits and pitfalls of the alternative setting programs gleaned from interviews. Interviewing the Respondents who supervise and work in the selected programs revealed what they do, how they experience and understand what they do, what they believe to be true about their programs, and how they explain the relationships and structures within their programs that create success where students who are suspended without this structure and support fail. Respondents were asked to explain
how they overcame barriers to establish their programs. Interviews were scheduled with the administration, guidance counselors, and teachers at the schools, and notes were carefully transcribed for thematic analysis using a topographical lens, conceptual map, or landscape design metaphor of the answers. Commonalities and divergent elements in the answers were mapped and explained in Chapter IV.

The sampling frame was limited to principals, guidance counselors, and teachers in three schools that have alternative programs for youth who faced long-term suspension or removal, or who were otherwise at risk of removal from the traditional mainstream program due to school avoidance issues. All participants answered the same questions, but a focus for the principals specifically targeted how they maintained fiduciary support for the program with their Boards of Education.

The focus for counselors was on the services that were used to support the youth in the program, what they received and what was needed, compared to their mainstream counterparts. The focus for the teachers was on the circumstances and failures of the students in the regular mainstream programs that drove them to the alternative education settings, and teachers will also respond to what they do differently to reach those in Alt Ed settings.

No specific information on individuals was collected, but generalizations about the behaviors and disruptions caused in school were gathered. Principals of the alternative setting schools were interviewed regarding the specific structure of their programs: the work of their teachers, counselors, curricula, support staff, building use, and the management of the program. The guidance counselors were interviewed to provide insight into the academic aspects of the programs, specifically how the system enables them to gain credit recovery, earn a diploma, and
what counseling services are needed to meet those goals. Teachers were interviewed to provide insight on how they build success on the front lines.

One school hosts the program during the day in a separate wing, so they can transition back more easily, when they are ready. Additionally, they are fortunate enough to have enrollment levels that permit the wing to be commandeered. Another school hosts the program in a separate building, but the youth are permitted to transition back to the mainstream. They too were fortunate enough to have enrollment rates that permitted the combining of two schools to create available space. The third school includes alternative methodologies like mindfulness and restorative justice right into their daily routine to keep at risk youth in the mainstream. Answers will be transcribed and analyzed in search of comparison, of dimensions in each program that can be compared. Differences were explored, where they occurred. Elements of how the programs came to be successful, specifically how they overcame barriers and developed the programs and what they learned from their setbacks, were drawn to frame what success looks like. Common qualities and divergent qualities between the answers were mapped.

**Instruments**

The interviews were conducted face to face, and the questions were the same from school to school. To preserve the content of the data, the inventory of questions were kept confidential. For each educator interviewed, these precepts were established and maintained:

- Establish communication to learn what they do as administrators/educators
- Explore how they experience and understand what they do
- Converse about what they believe to be true about their programs
- Explore how they see the relationships and structures within their programs that foster success where those who are suspended without this structure and support fail
Interview Questions:

1. Describe the history of the program
   a. How long in existence
   b. Who started it and why?
   c. What is the structure?
   d. Did you use a model or create it yourselves?
   e. What drove the movement to go in the direction of creating an alternate setting program?
      i. Suspension Rates?
      ii. Graduation Rates?
      iii. Other motivation?

2. Describe the funding of the program
   a. salaries
   b. materials
   c. building use
   d. bussing
   e. other expenses

3. Staffing/Hiring
   a. How are people chosen? What do you look for?
   b. How many subjects?
   c. Support Staff, counselors, psychologists
   d. Office staff and janitorial needs

4. Recruitment/selection of students?
   a. What is the critical path method for eligibility?
      i. Disruption or insubordination?
      ii. Drugs
      iii. Alcohol
      iv. Weapons
      v. Other crime
   b. Who is eligible for the program?
      i. Short Term suspension
      ii. Long-term suspension
      iii. Juvenile justice cases?
      iv. Social/emotional issues
      v. Academic or credit recovery

5. How do you know when the program is successful?
   a. Key Factors
      i. Care of Teachers/ buy-in
      ii. Mindfulness?
      iii. PBIS
      iv. Other restorative practices
   b. Improved graduation rates?
   c. What percentage of students wash out?
   d. Is there a reduction in student disciplinary behavior?

6. What hurdles, impediments, or opposition was in the way?
a. Buy-in/Resistance
   i. Community Resistance
   ii. Institutional Resistance (teachers/administration believe on spending time and money on the good kids… research shows educators believe bad kids have earned the punishment…)
   iii. Culture change: be good or be gone vs. restorative justice mindset
b. Funding
c. Lack of policy/regulation from State Ed or local Board of Ed
d. Lack of effective model to follow
7. Describe a favorite story of success; describe a story of failure
   a. What restorative practices worked?
   b. What restorative practices were tried?
   c. Why do you think the effort failed?
8. Rank these qualities for program success:
   a. _____ Contact with families
   b. _____ Teacher buy-in/care
   c. _____ Individual Goal Setting
   d. _____ Training of Interruption of Action (Stop/think/Talk, mindfulness/meditation, other)
   e. _____ Groups, restorative circles, therapy
   f. _____ Other ________________________
9. What do you do with repeat offenders?
10. How would you grade/rate the program’s effectiveness? Why?
11. If the program is working, what do you do; if something is not working/failing, what do you do to change?
12. What recommendations do you have for other principals/guidance personnel who are thinking of implementing such a program?

During the interviews, the researcher will keep focus:

…interviewing as a research design needs to be a reflexive and iterative process… Every stage of the progress should be flexible, meaning interviewees could add something beyond the scope of the questions, so the interviewer needs to be able to adapt to the conditions in the field. (Flick, 2007, p. 33)

Regarding audio recording or scripting the answers, if the interviewees were comfortable, the interviews were recorded. All participants agreed to be recorded. The interviewer split his focus between the interviewee and scribing notes, while simultaneously thinking about the questions. Having the dialogue recorded permitted the interviewer to revisit the answers after the interview. While scribing notes during the interview, the interviewer focused on non-verbal
responses, like changes in pitch, pace, or tone, movements in body language, and mood. Focusing on how the person responds, while allowing the recording device to capture their words helped to prevent certain biases from the interviewer. To prevent preconceived ideas about the success or lack success of alternative educational setting programs, the researcher carefully watched for nuances in body language and tone. If an interviewee was uncomfortable being recorded, the interviewer confirmed that all responses were confidential.

**Population and Sampling Method**

By interviewing different subjects at the three schools, a cross section of the answers, noting commonalities and divergences, helped to provide information allowing the researcher to create a conceptual map or a topography of the systems. In addition to the questions, the interviewer encouraged the subjects to provide a narrative about their programs to extend the scope of the results. This dialogue should help to back-fill any gaps in the questioning and provide an historical framework about each system. One reason the three groups were chosen to be interviewed was to marshal against what Flick (2007) coined threats to internal validity.

Gathering as much of the respondents’ perspectives on their programs and their roles in them will prevent researcher bias or presumptions about the programs. The questions were developed to mine for cause and effect in the respondents’ perspectives of their established alternative ed. settings. Most participants have been involved in their programs for some time. Follow-up interviews were scheduled if there was not sufficient contrast in the respondents’ answers. Rigor of technique was maintained through consistency in questioning and transcription to enhance the perceived reliability of the researcher. The researcher’s home district had an alternative education setting that was closed during budget cuts, so familiarity with alternative setting education programs provided a framework to maintain that consistency.
Data Collection and Analysis

The written transcripts of the interviews were carefully reviewed for comparison. Generalizations will be made about the common threads found to create the conceptual map of the respondents’ contributions. Triangulation provides the means of analyzing the variants in respondents’ perspectives on the success of their programs.

In his book, *Designing Qualitative Research*, Flick, (2007) provides a structured approach to data analysis of interviews. Through comparison, three levels of analysis will occur:

1. within a category, for each question, the researcher will assess what is relevant;
2. within a case, the researcher will filter for consistent and contradictory statements between the questions in each respondent’s answers;
3. between cases, the researcher will evaluate the different respondents’ answers, looking for consistent and divergent points of view for similar questions opposed to other respondents in the same districts and between the different districts (2007).

Flick suggests that generalization helps the researcher to develop conclusions about the analysis:

> Constant comparison [by the researcher] of materials is an important step on the way from the single case to more (or less) general statements drawn from analyzing the data. To avoid overgeneralization, researchers should carefully reflect the boundaries of their data and the sample of people (or materials) they are based on. (Flick, 2007, p102)

Flick reminds the researcher of the importance of triangulation. Examining the research question through the perspectives of the different respondents, the researcher can establish validity.

Finding consistency in the respondents’ answers will establish consistency. It is important to integrate participants’ perspectives on the data into the final thematic analysis. Interviewing multiple stake-holders permits data triangulation, which will provide insight into the varying perspectives of the alternative education settings. Conducting interviews of administrators in different programs provides a level of environmental triangulation. One school is rural, one
suburban, and one is urban. Finding similarities in their different schools will lend validity because the results were not impacted by the environment.

Analyzing the triangulation data for commonalities and differences will provide the means to map the landscape of the answers. Like Flick (2007), Otten and Geppert (2009) created a conceptual metaphor for creating a “heuristic frame for maneuver through the rapidly expanding galaxy of research (Otten & Geppert, 2009, p. 1) …of living, dynamic science.” (p. 3). The metaphor enables the researcher to construct imagery to represent the data contexts of the responses as a landscape, where the researcher can examine the commonalities and differences of the responses as on a conceptual map.

…by addressing core themes or subjects… e.g. discourses, emotion, adjustment [in] communication… This approach has the advantage that the landscape can be mapped according to major ‘thematic landmarks’ which emerge… in other and more metaphorical words: we gain orientation by looking at the ‘geological and topographical’ maps of… communication [as] research. (Otten & Geppert, 2009, p. 8)

By connecting common threads between the respondents’ answers, and by finding points where the respondents deviate from one another within their answers, the researcher can map the discourse to find features of the landscape in the dialogue, and to develop contour lines as on a map to bring the respondents’ answers into fine relief.

Summary of Methodologies

Chapter III provides a lens through which can be observed the questions, population, and methodology for collecting and analyzing the data for a case study approach. Chapter IV will describe the different schools that will participate in the study, articulating the type of school: rural, suburban, or city as defined by NYSED. Additionally, Chapter IV will introduce the educators who will participate in the study, explore the structure of the schools and how the Alt Ed programs work, and their responses will be analyzed for commonalities and differences.
CHAPTER IV: SCHOOLS, DATA, AND RESULTS

Data Collection and Maintenance

The focus of this study was to explore three Alternative Education programs in New York State. There are few such programs throughout the counties, so by interviewing key people in the programs, the researcher explored the impediments and hurdles those programs overcame. By comparing the respondents’ testimony, the truths as to how their programs came into existence, and what obstacles were faced and surmounted, will be explored. This study included a preliminary interview with the founding administrator for historical background and to garner permission to conduct the study.

The main participants in the study were program principals, counselors, and teachers from 3 schools across New York State. Interviews were conducted face to face with the participants, and the researcher took notes of the responses. The interviewees had advanced copies of the questions, and the notes were transcribed. Attention was taken to remove all identifying markers by creating new names for the schools and associated educators. The schools visited were a cross section of New York’s cultural environments: rural, suburban, and urban. This level of anonymity provided cause for the SUNY Albany Institutional Review Board (IRB) Office to grant this study exempt status for the study of human subjects.

To ensure the reliability and validity of this qualitative study, the researcher employed the concept of Trustworthiness (Hemmer 2012; Lincoln, & Guba, 1985, p. 665), which means to take measures to preserve credibility. “Truth Value—the transferability of results… applicability, dependability… consistency… several safeguards were implemented to ensure reliability of judgment by considering diverse perspectives” (IBID). Interviews were held face to face, and one on one. The interviews were recorded to back up the interviewer’s notes, and
anonymity was assured to the interviewees: names were changed and abbreviated. In all three schools, a higher-ranking administrator developed the programs, and it was those administrators who granted permission for this study. In two cases, it was an assistant superintendent and a superintendent, and, in the third, the high school principal gave permission. The participants’ level of experience varied; some had broad experience in other programs, and the researcher’s own experience as an administrator helped to instill in the participants the feeling that reliability and confidentiality would be safeguarded.

The notes from the interviews were collected into a research journal. Appendix A contains summaries of the interviews and verbatim quotes the researcher believed to be of particular importance. Each of the nine interviews, after the meeting with the founding administrators, was conducted in the respective interviewee’s office, except the teachers. The teachers were interviewed in an office or a library where privacy was secured. Most interviewees spoke freely and unguardedly about their experiences for forty five minutes to an hour. Appendix A is organized by the 12 interview questions rather than by school or by interviewee role. The researcher found it informative to draw comparisons between the answers and the respondents for the questions in turn, comparing the responses to each question in the same space.

Some interviewees were able to expound on certain questions to some depth, while other respondents had little knowledge of some matters. For example, the founding administrators and principals had the most knowledge of the history of the programs, how they came into existence, and how the barriers were surmounted. The counselors and principals had deeper understanding of how the students were recruited, but the teachers and counselors had specific anecdotes of success and failure. The teachers generally knew less about the programs’ histories or operating
costs, except for Mr. H. from Chestnut Ridge. He was a long-serving veteran of the district’s many iterations of Alt-Ed, and he was recruited to mentor the Alt-Ed principal and staff in their current program. Every respondent had clear definitions of success, generally focusing on student performance, but the principals and founding administrators provided broader answers incorporating program success and graduation rates.

The researcher found it practical in triangulating the responses to use summaries and bullets for the respondents’ answers rather than a full script of the responses. Presenting the data in this fashion helped to gather similarities and differences in the responses, which made the conceptual map navigable. Instances where direct quotations provide verbatim answers, the researcher broke from summary in those cases to emphasize in quotes where a respondent had emphasized during the interview, indicating the answer was of particular importance to the respondent.

**Schools Studied**

District or building administrators who founded the Alt-Ed programs in three school districts in different regions of New York State agreed to permit their programs to be part of this study, and they secured volunteers from their program administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers to participate. Preliminary interviews with these charismatic leaders reveal different approaches but the same goal: continuing the education of students who have proven unsuccessful in traditional classrooms. To protect anonymity, names of schools were changed, and names of interviewees were changed and reduced to initials.

**Pine Ridge**

In the 2016-2017 school year, Pine Ridge, a rural school, had 1708 pupils; 53% were male and 47% were female. 66% self-reported as white, 13% as African Americans, 17% as
Hispanic, while 4% reported being members of other groups. Forty percent of Pine Ridge students are considered economically disadvantaged, which qualifies them for free and reduced lunch. Sixteen percent of Pine Ridge students receive Special Education Services, and 1% receive services as English Language Learners (https://data.nysed.gov/enrollment).

Pine Ridge High School Principal A. is the founding leader of their program. Principal A. started an alternative program for the 10-12th grade 10 years ago. Using an empty wing of the high school, Principal A. assigned classrooms and office space to create a school within a school. He created a 9th grade success program in the mainstream school. Both were attempts to limit the number of youth sent away to out of district alternative education, and to limit district costs. There are approximately 230 10-12th graders in the current alternative setting contained in a separate wing of the main building at Pine Ridge.

The program operates during the normal school day, in the dedicated wing. Mr. A.’s model has 3 phases. The concurrent Alt Ed setting is where the bulk of students who are unsuccessful in the main program attend. He hired an Alt Ed setting principal, Mr. B., who reports directly to him. Mr. A. also hired a dedicated guidance counselor, Ms. C., a security person, a greeter, and teachers for the 4 core subjects. Physical education and foreign language push in from the mainstream program.

Spanish teacher Ms. D. splits her time between the program and the mainstream high school. She teaches Spanish in the Alt Ed program, so those youth can earn their NYS Advanced Regents diplomas, which require a foreign language component among other benchmarks. As they mature in the program, at risk youth can return to the main high school for electives, if their behavior warrants it. Mr. A. reports that most of them who find success in the alternative program choose to stay there through graduation. “They build relationships with the
faculty in the program, relationships that eluded them in the larger mainstream program.” Mr. A. believes that the kids recognize and pursue success, once they have felt and experienced it.

There is a second phase of alternative education at Pine Ridge. Students with serious school avoidance concerns or serious disciplinary incidents attend the second phase. It is also a place for social emotional disorders, particularly school anxiety. The classes are very small, thus more intimate, and they focus on credit recovery. Students in the second phase ride to school on the high school dismissal busses, and they return home on a late bus run, which is typically used by athletes after practice.

A third level of alternative education at Pine Ridge is night school. Night school provides tutoring services and is reserved for credit recovery, for example, youth who struggle to pass a Regents exam. This level of intervention is the least common in Pine Ridge’s Alt Ed setting programs. Those who fell short on an element needed for graduation, or older students who return to finish, populate the third phase.

This study focused primarily on the Alt Ed program that runs concurrently with the mainstream program in the separate wing. Mr. A. states that Mr. B. and Ms. C., the guidance counselor, are well versed in PBIS, particularly mindfulness. Mr. A. created staff development opportunities for Mr. B. and Ms. C. to train the Alt Ed staff in those techniques. Mr. A. touts the program as very successful, even invaluable. Twenty to 25 at risk youth who would have dropped out, earn their high school diplomas every year through the Alt Ed program. Mr. A. states that this has increased the school’s graduation rate 7% or more since the program was instituted.

Chestnut Hill
In the 2016-2017 school year, Chestnut Hill, a suburban high school, had 2552 students; 51% were male and 49% were female. Thirty-three percent self-reported as white; 14% as African American; 49% reported as Hispanic, while 4% reported being members of other groups. Forty-eight percent of Chestnut Hill students are considered economically disadvantaged, which qualifies them for free and reduced lunch. Twelve percent of Chestnut Hill’s students receive Special Education services, and 8% receive services as English Language Learners (https://data.nysed.gov/enrollment).

Assistant Superintendent Dr. E. is the initial contact person for this study, though the alternative principal, Mr. F., is the main contact. Chestnut Hill provides a separate location for their Alt Ed program. The program is housed in the central administration building, which is on a separate campus from the high school, so there is no interaction between the students in alternate education program and the regular high school students, except for sports and extracurricular activities, if the Alt Ed student is eligible to participate.

Dr. E. explained that he hired an Alt Ed principal, who reports to the high school principal, but Dr. E. ultimately oversees all academic programs in the district. The Alt Ed program has a guidance counselor, Ms. G., who will participate in the study. A part-time psychologist, a part-time social worker, one science teacher, two social studies teachers, one English teacher, one math teacher, one art teacher, and two Special Education teachers who service the 125-150 youth in the program were hired. Special Ed teacher, Mr. H., has worked in Alt Ed settings within the district for 25 years, and he will participate in this study. Physical Education and health are taught as a unit, with teachers travelling to from the main high school. The classes are offered in a three-period block each day, so fewer courses are taught simultaneously, meaning they would have English and science one semester, and history and
math the other. Associated Regents exams are then administered in January and June, depending upon which courses were taken during the corresponding semester. This practice reduces their daily workloads, which, according to Assistant Superintendent E., gives them a greater chance of success by enabling them to focus their time and energy on fewer academic subjects at a time.

Character Education is a mainstay of PBIS at the Chestnut Hill’s Alt Ed program. The program is focused on developing social emotional heath and skills. Dr. E. said that everyone working in the Alt Ed setting uses a 2015 book entitled *Better than Carrots and Sticks*, by Smith, Fisher, and Frey, as a program guide. According to Dr. E., when rewards and consequences fail, shame and humiliation never work; trust needs to be rebuilt. He quoted Fredrick Douglas: “It is easier to build strong children than repair broken men.” Restorative justice practices, along with character education, are the focus points. Dr. E. described the youth in their alternative program as *at risk*. Some are placed there for their poor behavior, but those with school avoidance issues and low attendance are recruited as well. They are at risk of not graduating, which puts them at risk for the host of life consequences that accompany not completing high school. The appeal of the small group settings, and block scheduling to reduce academic load, are strong lures. The program is enhanced by an online program called *Edgenuity*, which also appeals to those with poor attendance or school avoidance issues. Dr. E. emphasized that if he can bring them physically into the Alt Ed program, they have a chance.

Community service and a school-to-work component helps the students in the Alt Ed program in Chestnut Hill to develop skills, which helps their sense of success. Community partners in local businesses assist with the school-to-work element of the program, and, coupled with the character education and restorative justice efforts, according to Dr. E., the graduation rate over time climbed from 83% to over 90%.
**Ursa City**

In the 2016-2017 school year, Ursa City, a city district, as defined by NYSED, had 1675 students; 52% were male and 48% were female. Sixty-six percent self-reported as white; 8% as African American; 6% reported as Hispanic, 12% reported as Asian or Pacific Islander, while 8% reported being members of other groups including multi-racial. Forty percent of Ursa City’s students are considered economically disadvantaged, which qualifies them for free and reduced lunch. Twelve percent of Ursa City’s students receive Special Education services, and 5% receive services as English Language Learners (https://data.nysed.gov/enrollment).

Superintendent Dr. I. is the initial contact person for this study. Ursa City does not have a physical, separate alternative education location. Under Dr. I.’s leadership, Ursa City has infused alternative education practices into their daily operations, and, according to him, they have found quite a bit of success.

In a phone interview, Superintendent I. reported that restorative justice, SPBIS, and character education are focal points for everyone in Ursa City. Dr. I. named the 2018 book *Culture of Love: Cultivating a Positive and Transformational Organizational Culture*, by Luvelle Brown, as required reading. It is a program guide for his faculty because, in the book, Brown explores how to blend the concepts popular in alternative educational settings into the mainstream of a public high school. Dr. I. explained that he cultivated a new culture in Ursa City through staff training, hiring like-minded staff, and student training. In response to disruptive actions, for example, teachers and staff are asked to think restoratively. Quoting from the book:

> Instead of seeking to exclude [students] from the classroom community, educators worked closely with me and other administrators to find alternatives to suspension and isolation. Examples included… reflective papers and small group problem-solving conversations with peers. (Brown, 2018, pp. 31-32)
Dr. I. acknowledged in a phone interview that Ursa City still takes the occasional students to 3214 hearings, or “superintendent hearings,” where long term suspensions are enacted, but he never assigns more than 10 days, if the student is willing to participate in restorative justice actions within the community. Dr. I. did admit that there were rare exceptions, usually for significant violence. One student was suspended for a year for making a bomb threat to the school, and another was reassigned to a special program at the local regional BOCES center after mutilating animals and sending pictures to classmates as threats. More pedestrian examples of violence, and even drug use/sales that are the mainstays for long-term suspension in other public schools, are handled with restorative practices at Ursa City.

One example Dr. I. provided for restorative practices was how he transformed the in-school suspension room into a “reflect and return” room. As an exercise in mindfulness, students who are disruptive are sent to the room to read and to write a reflection about the inciting incident, and when they cool down, they are allowed to return to class. Additionally, Dr. I. described a reflective place within each classroom he calls “mental health spaces,” as a technique his teachers use this space to manage students in ways better than humiliation and isolation. Superintendent Dr. I. believes the theories are working. Over the last seven years of his tenure, Dr. I. reports that Ursa City High School’s graduation rate has climbed to from 90% to 94%.

Analysis of the Data

Analysis will provide comparative and contrasting elements between the answers of the participants, which will lead to analysis and conclusion as to why there are not more successful Alternative Education Programs available to youth at risk in New York public schools. Triangulation is a technique of comparisons between the answers provided in three programs by the participants, and further comparisons between the individuals interviewed in each program.
provided the method of analysis for this study (Hemmer et al., 2013, p. 664). Triangulation as a metaphor for data analysis first came from surveying and sea navigation (Thurmond, 2001, p. 253). Thurmond goes on to write,

> The intent in research is to use two or more aspects of research to strengthen the design to increase to interpret findings… Triangulation is the combination of two or more data sources within the same study. This results in data triangulation… where the researcher discovers areas of convergence and divergence. (Thurmond, 2001, pp. 253-234)

Reoccurring themes were found in the answers of the respondents of this study, and those themes focused the analysis of the data. Comparative dimensions or commonalities and differences in the answers of various respondents were drawn; those experiences and reflections of the participants helped to create a landscape of the culture of the school, and topographical analysis of that landscape was the primary means of qualitative analysis (Flick, 2007, p. 102). Culture as narrative of their shared experiences produced contours of similarity, but the differences in their positions, particularly of the supervisors, provided some depth and heights to serve as contrasting contours.

**Thematic Lenses for Analysis**

The data will be examined through three thematic lenses, and the researcher will provide reflective interpretation using triangulation:

I. Obstacles to Implementation
   a. Resistance to change
   b. Unexpected… parents, students, community
   c. Funding: justifying the use of scarce resources
   d. Perception of youth at risk: unmanageable, intractable, discarded

II. Good Leadership
   a. Leaders who can know how to sell the program to stakeholders
   b. What characteristics do the data suggest that are needed in a good leader?

III. Standards of Effectiveness
a. Issues
   b. How are alternative methods demonstrably more effective?
   c. What denotes effective beyond graduation rates?
   d. How do people in the field define success? (What qualities or characteristics of success would make them better humans and less likely to go to prison or lead troubled lives?)

**Theme 1: Obstacles in Implementing Alternative Education**

The second research question for this study: *What are the impediments to establishing Alternative Education Programs, and how do the benefits outweigh the barriers...* led the researcher to formulate interview questions about funding, which is the primary obstacle. It was revealed early that funding issues stemmed from another formidable barrier: lack of support. All other barriers are surmountable, if the district is willing to fund specialized staff, training, materials, operating space including the normal expenses associated with running a building, bussing, and janitorial and cafeteria services. Each participant in the study provided answers for analysis. By comparing the responses between respondents in the same building, and between counterparts in different buildings, the researcher was able to triangulate the data to find the truth.

The researcher observed, throughout the course of the interviews, that the data from Pine Ridge and Chestnut Hill had many parallels, while Ursa City drew contrasting contour lines. All three districts historically struggled with student discipline and non-completion, which drove down graduation rates. There were elements in each community calling for change, contrasting with an established culture of those stakeholders who believe those who misbehave deserve what happens to them: a “be good or be gone” mentality. To change this culture, Pine Ridge and Chestnut Hill followed parallel paths, while Ursa City took a steeper path to the peak on the conceptual map. All three enjoy: fewer discipline incidents, improved graduation rates, and satisfied communities.
Principal A described how the program came into existence: he started with a remediation program and gathered support through small successes, until he had enough support to hire Mr. B., his Alt Ed principal of Pine Ridge. Mr. B. described how he was able to overcome obstacles, often with support of Mr. A. and the superintendent. Mr. B. attributed success of the program to individual successes:

Our program kids are the type with disciplinary records for cutting class, insubordination, language abuse, etc. Kids with attendance issues and school phobia have done well here, but recruiting them is hard. We’ve done home visits, like wellness checks with the social workers and law enforcement. Once they learn they can be in the small class setting and get much more attention from the teachers and counselors, they come, and those who come find success. (Mr. B.)

Mr. B. reports greatly improved student behavior in the Alt Ed program. According to Mr. B., only two or three students per year of approximately 50 youth are removed for discipline. Mr. B. believes both improved graduation rates and improved behavior have altered the culture of punishment within the community.

Community buy-in was very difficult at first. Mr. A. started the program in a trailer next to the middle school, but now we have a wing of the high school. Community support took time, but the work-based learning projects really helped to win the hearts and minds of the community. (Mr. B.)

Mr. B. articulated that the internship program they have where students go into the community to work in businesses has been positive advertising for the Alt Ed Program. Community members, Mr. B. believes, see them as individuals learning a trade. They find success that is visible in the community, and this first-hand observation of success by community members fostered a strong culture of support for the program, which opened the barrier of funding. Once they had secure funding, the other barriers were surmountable.
It was initially a credit recovery and students with disciplinary issues, but it has since evolved to be a safe space for students who have school anxiety, which manifests itself in disciplinary and academic failure. It is a school within a school. (Ms. C.)

Guidance Counselor Ms. C. at Pine Ridge described the history of the program, and she too recalled that small successes slowly built a shift in culture. Ms. C. noted that she felt the culture of the teachers in the mainstream was an important barrier. They believed the misbehaving students deserved their punishment, and they were envious of the funding for Alt Ed. The changes in culture, the willingness to buy-in and financially support the program within both the community and the school faculty, came from observable success. Changes in student behavior garnered parental and faculty support, and improvements in the graduation rate created broad support, particularly from the community, who vote on the budget.

Alt Ed Principal Mr. F. in Chestnut Hill provided answers that closely paralleled those given in Pine Ridge. The history of the program in the district was older than Pine Ridge. They had several iterations of remedial programs, but each had been unsuccessful. Mr. F. described how Assistant Superintendent E. recruited him for this program, and through small victories, community support grew.

The kids in the Alt Ed program have their issues. They are at risk but not necessarily long-term suspension kids. It is better for them to be here in the program. It is a smaller setting, and kids develop relationships with their teachers in the program. (Mr. F.)

Mr. F. felt strongly that if a student accepts the program and attends regularly, he or she finds success. Another similarity between Pine Ridge and Chestnut Hill: both have an evening credit recovery. They don’t accept youth engaged in criminal activity into their Alt Ed environments. Really disruptive students in both programs are sent to credit recovery, but both principals note that very few of that small number find success. One subtle contrasting element between the programs: Pine Ridge is a rural school, where Chestnut Hill is suburban. It was not discussed
during the interviews but inferred: funding is less of an issue in Chestnut Hill as the area is more affluent. Considering the number of staff, one administrator, one counselor, 10 teachers, a security person, and part time psychiatrist/social worker, plus the breakfast and lunch programs, the funding demands are substantial.

Chestnut Hill Guidance Counselor G. provided parallel support for Principal F in her interview. She described the previous Alt Ed program as failing, but explained that the new program with Mr. F. had a positive reputation in the community. According to Ms. G., the district was interested in making change, so the Assistant Superintendent Dr. E. the new Alt Ed in the elementary school.

Public perception of the old program was awful. It was considered on the same level as a jail. She remembers that the district wanted to rebrand the image. They closed the Railroad building and combined the programs here in this elementary school. I chose to work in the Alt Ed program; she applied specifically for it. (Ms. G.)

Ms. G.’s enthusiasm for the program reveals the culture of support within the community. She graduated from the district’s mainstream program only a few years ago, and when she finished college, she specifically applied to work there. Few inexperienced educators would seek employment in a program with the reputation of a prison. Ms. G. explained that there was lingering institutional resistance. Some faculty in the mainstream program are envious of the funding, but she explained that when at risk youth graduate and go back to visit, faculty are often amazed at the changes they see in the once-troubled youth.

The data from Ursa City provided contrast in many ways, though there were elements of contours of similarity. Ursa City Principal Mr. J. described the history of the program as the Board of Education was unsatisfied with the status quo and recruited Superintendent Dr. I. to
radically change the direction of the school. Dr. I. then recruited Mr. J., and they built an Alt Ed program entirely contained within the mainstream high school.

Prior to the arrival of the current superintendent, the high school utilized Out of School Suspension, In School Suspension, After School Detention, and Lunch Detention as most traditional high schools employ across the state. The superintendent came to the district, recruited by the Board of Education. He brought changes, particularly to how discipline is managed at the high school. Essentially, the elements that make a successful alternative program were infused into the high school culture. (Mr. J.)

For Mr. J., the trauma of removing a student was eliminated, but one similar parallel to Pine Ridge and Chestnut Hill does exist. Youth who commit egregious offenses are removed from the mainstream. According to Mr. J., the stark contrast that creates the steep path to the topographical peak of student success and community support, is that the Ursa City students found success through the additional attention, guidance, and SWPBIS implementation. Theirs was just implemented within the mainstream setting.

Ursa City Counselor Ms. K. is new to the district, so her answers were tempered by her previous experiences. Ms. K. reflected on those she sees and the success she’s observed:

Students who would have been recruited for alternative education in other districts are in the mainstream of Ursa City high School. In her previous experience, restorative practices dovetail with disciplinary measures, but in this program restorative practices are the first line of approach. Students are sent from classes for disruption or disrespectful behavior, and counselors and social workers explore with the child and families in problem-solving techniques. (Ms. K.)

Ms. K. believes working on problem solving, and teaching the child the adults’ perspective, help to change behavior. Ms. K. felt the impact of the process for the student provided the chance to learn about the behavior without being removed and cultivated support within the community, making the program very popular. They initially misbehave, but they learn to alter their behavior. They remain in school, which fosters academic success.
Both Ms. K and Mr. L., Ursa City’s teacher who works with the Alt Ed population, provided a contrasting element for triangulation in Ursa City that was not observed in Pine Ridge or Chestnut Hill. In Ursa City, the School Board of Education, presumably with support from key stakeholders, decided to change direction and create the hybrid program of blending the elements of Alt Ed into the mainstream high school. Where in Pine Ridge and Chestnut Hill support gathered gradually, building upon small successes. The positive culture was largely supportive but took time to develop.

The programs were in separate locations from the mainstream, meaning in those communities, the youth requiring the additional attention received it; they found success, and there was little disruption to the mainstream students’ daily lives. In Ursa City, the change was sudden. Those experiencing difficulty behaving remain in class but are given guidance and counseling. This potentially affects daily life in the mainstream. Ms. K. and Mr. L. admit that there are members of the faculty who felt disrupted by the abrupt changes, who wish for a more traditional approach: student accountability. Both Ms. K and Mr. L. support the program. They report that student behavior has improved. Graduation rates have climbed on pace with Pine Ridge and Chestnut Hill, but these respondents indicate that there are pockets of resistance within the building that don’t exist in Pine Ridge and Chestnut Hill. There are pockets of resistance in the community. There is a supportive culture, but it was really the Board and Superintendent’s decision to make the change that removed the barrier of funding.

**Theme 2: Good Leadership**

The first research question for this study: *What is involved in creating an Alternative Setting environment for students who struggle to find success in the mainstream program…* lends itself to this theme and led the researcher to formulate interview questions about the
qualities of the people building and leading these programs. The education leaders have to possess a vision different than those who persist in the traditional way of doing business, and they have to find like-minded people to join them in the endeavor. The three principals agreed that once the funding concerns resolved, the tasks of finding specialized staff, training them, finding materials and operating spaces, bussing and janitorial and cafeteria services, would require an experienced leader. A person with management training could handle most of the logistical tasks, but the researcher will focus on the qualities that would require insight, patience, creativity, and stick-to-itiveness necessary to find the right faculty, to train them, to muddle through the daily challenges of running an Alt Ed program servicing some of the districts’ most at risk youth.

Mr. B. Alt Ed Principal was particular about who works in the Alt Ed program at Pine Ridge.

New teachers are not chosen. The staff needs some experience in talking to and dealing with tough kids. Just writing referrals and throwing them out of class is unproductive. The right staff is important. They have to be willing/able to deal with our kids. There is a perception among the main high school staff that the kids in our program are dysfunctional, so the principal (Mr. A.), has to recruit heavily. Mr. A. focuses on teachers he thinks connect with the type of student in the program. The teachers we have in the core are very stable and have been here for years, but that poses other problems with turn-over, mainly from retirement. (Mr. B.)

Mr. B. works closely with the mainstream principal, relying on his extensive experience and influence in the community. Teachers are chosen deliberately for this skill set, and sometimes recruitment is hard. Triangulating the best answer, the researcher included the testimony of Ms. D., the Pine Ridge Alt Ed teacher and Ms. C., Pine Ridge Alt Ed counselor, whose responses draw parallel lines in the topography of support: “Certain personalities, people who can work with this population, are chosen.”
Ms. D. stated, telling the researcher that she asked to be a part of the program; Ms. C. made clear what Ms. D. alluded to: “…Mr. A. looks for a particular style of classroom management in his teachers – the kind of person who can handle a certain amount of insubordination and turn it around themselves without kicking the kid out of class and making everything a disciplinary referral.” Her response underscored Mr. B.’ remark about “referrals being unproductive.” In Pine Ridge, they recognize that the way the adults respond to disruptive impulses has a great effect on how the incidents are resolved.

In Chestnut Hill and Ursa City, the educators provided similar answers, with some contours of divergence. “Teachers with the right mindset are tapped to work with our at risk population.” Mr. F. agreed with Mr. B., but “Often our teachers apply to come to the program.” In Chestnut Hill, the program is older and better known. Faculty, like his counselor, Ms. G, apply directly. “The program is so popular and successful now, many teachers apply directly to work here.” Mr. F. added.

In Ursa City, Mr. J. provides staff development for the teachers, but he hired three deans to work with them when they disrupt or become emotionally unfit for the classroom:

The deans find food and clothing, services for these children as many are severely needy. There is a change in focus, culturally. It is not three guys doling out punishment; they cultivate relationships, find resources, and support families. They work with parents of the students; they are life coaches. (Mr. J.)

Mr. J. works to teach the teachers these skills, but this program is in the mainstream. “Classes must continue, so those who disrupt are often removed to counseling for a restorative session or to a dean.” Mr. J. didn’t directly state it, but the researcher understands that the child may have a meltdown in class in-front of peers or with a teacher who has not cultivated the skills to manage an eruption of emotion. More importantly, though not directly stated, if the deans are working
with these children on a level of providing them with food, clothing, and family series, the chemistry of those relationships would be much more complex. The depth of understanding the deans have with those kids would dwarf that of a typical teacher, who likely could not handle insubordination or misbehavior in-front of a classroom full of students. Mr. J. calls it pride, and he refers to his deans the “pipelines to the future.”

The theme of good leadership examined through the data of this portion of the study suggests that the leaders should find the right people and support them. There is an underlying structure, however, to this section of the conceptual map. The instructional leaders find good people. They find them, provide staff development and support, and let them lead in their classrooms. The hidden underpinning is that everyone involved in the Alt Ed program needs a combination of qualities described by Mr. A. and Mr. J.: “the kind of person who can handle a certain amount of insubordination…” and “develop those types of relationships.” The researcher reflected on whether or not these qualities could be taught. Perhaps they can be developed, but they are personality markers of exceptional educators.

To gain a deeper understanding of the qualities of leadership required for Alt Ed, the researcher asked an interview question, “if something is not working or failing, what do you do to change it?” Mr. B. reports that in Pine Ridge, “We hold bi-weekly meetings with everyone to bring issues to light. We make changes together. We meet to discuss and brainstorm. We discuss why.”

At Chestnut Hill, “If something is not working, we address it head on,” Mr. F. stated. “We are a team. We meet as a staff daily to review.” Mr. F. was proud of the support his team showed for one another.
“If we need to adjust, we meet as administration, deans, counselors, and teachers…” all who are involved, Mr. J. reported for Ursa City. “We maintain what works and fix what doesn’t.”

Triangulating the answers of the three principals provides a clear pattern in the conceptual map of the data: teamwork, collaboration, and the willingness to make the changes necessary are what it takes to be successful, and to have the faculty and staff willing to collaborate in this model is proof of the leadership skills of the principals.

A final feature in the map of the data supporting what makes strong leaders who can create and maintain an Alt Ed program is the final interview question all respondents were asked: What recommendations do you have for other personnel who wish to implement a program? Mr. B. gave advice in three points that work for him in Pine Ridge:

   a. The right staff members have to be chosen. They can’t be quick with disciplinary referrals, but they can’t be pushovers. They must believe in the program.
   b. Group cohesion: there must be a sense of team.
   c. The family has to be involved and supportive. Catch the parents, and often you’ll catch the kids.

Mr. F. advice for what worked for as he built the program in Chestnut Hill:

   a. Contact people living and doing the work. Mr. F. has had others come to visit his program.
   b. Mr. F. has visited programs: he has been around Westchester to see programs support for and from other programs is vital to our survival.

Mr. J. was more philosophical in his response,

   a. The principal encouraged people to explore social emotional training, to consider restorative methods, mindfulness, and to read Dr. Brown’s book, *Culture of Love*.
   b. There is a lot of literature out there about developing a program that doesn’t include developing a culture of exclusion.
Triangulating between the answers, the researcher developed a clear map of what strong leadership characteristics look like: collaborative; listens to teammates; seeks answers outside of the team; a student of other programs and published literature. A good leader is a student of the job. The teachers and counselors who responded to this question provided parallel answers of collaboration and support, but Ms. G. of Chestnut Hill provided some illustrative depth. Good leaders must “provide plenty of professional development for the faculty and staff because the skills needed for success in Alt Ed are not expressly taught in college, particularly in school phobia, trauma, anxiety, and family crisis management.” Ms. G. extended her answer: “I’ve heard of educators who burn out and leave these types of programs.” Ms. G. offered that her leaders have provided these things to the Chestnut Hill team remarking: “There is a sense of team or family among the faculty here.” Ms. G. surmised that “perhaps the difficulty of teaching these students draws the adults closer than in the mainstream program.” Program building requires a leader who can surmount barriers, inspire people, and manage the unmanageable.

The researcher notes two barriers to implementation that were never resolved but didn’t impede their success: there are very few models in other public schools to imitate, and there is no guidance from State Education on these types of programs. It speaks to the qualities of these principals who were pioneers into this type of Alternate Education, but at the end of their interviews, the principals expressed humility in reminding the researcher of the charismatic leader in upper administration who were the real visionary pioneers.

**Theme 3: Standards of Effectiveness**

Several interview questions for this study provided answers for the researcher to map. Each respondent was asked if their respective programs were successful, and the answer was
unanimously, “yes.” Each in turn was then asked to provide an anecdote of a failure, an example of a success, and an explanation as to why their programs are successful.

During his interview, Mr. B. expounded upon the idea of success of his program:

In 8 years, our graduation rates at the mainstream high school went from the mid 80’s% to 91%. Last year, 27 of 29 seniors graduated, and we are on pace for the same number this year, but it can’t just be about graduation rates only. It is good for kids. The program has changed the trajectory of their lives, especially if they get a diploma. The 3214 kids usually go to the after school credit-recovery program, but the kids who come to the alternative program are met where they are. (Mr. B.)

A notable contour line in Mr. B.’ answers was about graduation rates. The central administration educators the researcher met to secure permission to do the study all emphasized graduation rates. Mr. B., and most of the other participants, cite graduation rates as important, but like Mr. B. they all see other characteristics as just as important. Mr. B. reported that he runs disciplinary statistics on those in the program, and the longer they are there, the fewer incidents are encountered. “We tailor individual programs to the kids and focus on what they need. There are key factors that lead to success.” Mr. B. delineated a long list of factors, a few notable ones are:

A. Token Economy – students earn tokens for grades and positive behavior that count toward special lunch items.
B. Teach buy-in – Mr. B. believes that if the teachers didn’t support this work, there would be no program, and those teachers who don’t support the work wouldn’t stay long.
C. Field Trips for kids in the program
D. Work Based Learning Projects – kids in the program are assigned to local businesses for credit-earning work experiences in the community.
E. Restorative justice efforts made by all staff, particularly mindfulness and SWPBIS

The researcher asked Mr. B. how some of these were indicative of success, and he replied, “can you imagine trusting kids who were discipline problems or on the verge of drop-out with a field trip, or a time slot working in a community business during school hours? The program turned their lives around. They’re proud of themselves, and we are proud of them.”
The researcher pressed Mr. B. to provide an example of failure. Mr. B. described a boy who had some success and then started dating a girl who was into drugs. This led to multiple law enforcement incidents, and he never came back. Mr. B. emphasized that example was an exception. Most of them are successful as stated by him: “Twenty-seven out of 30 seniors in the program graduated last year, and we will have the same number for this year.” Mr. B. again stated it was not just about graduation. The researcher pressed him for an anecdote of success.

We had a boy last year who was socially awkward and resistant to the program. I observed the father put him down. He had a poor attitude toward school, but we coaxed him to come. He joined the Friday work-based-learning opportunities in a flower shop in town. He and the owner made a connection, and his confidence is flying now. That student is learning a business, and he has caught up with all of his credits. (Mr. B.)

“Not everything can be measured by increased graduation rates; that is an incomplete measurement.” Mr. F. argued regarding his program in Chestnut Hill. “Success is more intangible: are they coming to school? If so, they’ve improved on their truancy/school phobia issues. Did they pass a class that they previously failed?”

Mr. F.’s remarks run parallel to Mr. B. in this regard. “Success is hard to measure, but if you see a change in student behavior, where the old behaviors don’t exist and their attendance is up, that is success.” Mr. F. added to his remarks that Dr. E. and central office administrators, and even the Board of Ed agreed with this statement, but the graduation rate is a factor the taxpayers understand. The families of these youth understand, but the community at large likes to see statistics. The researcher pressed him for an example. Last year, 20 seniors went back to the day program and every one of them graduated. Mr. F. followed this example, however, with a counterpoint: “Graduation rate is hard to measure between the two buildings. The high school will send us seniors in March in an attempt to get them to graduate in June. It is hard to develop those relationships in so short a time.”
Mr. F. considers it a compliment to their program when they do graduate. The researcher pressed Mr. F. to provide an example of failure. Mr. F. took a moment and responded: “It happens more than I would like. Students drop for non-attendance, and this issue bothers me because it is indicative of other symptoms.” The researcher asked him to explain. Mr. F. provided an anecdote: “a boy recovered credit for three years, and then dropped in the fourth year. His mother was abusive and violent.” Mr. F. continued, “The boy was never a disciplinary problem here, but the mother was arrested for domestic violence. The father took him in, but he lived out of the district.” The district made arrangements for him to continue to come to the program, “but they lived in an awful motel. The room was moldy, and he eventually just dropped out to go to work to help his father pay bills.”

Mr. F.’s mood changed, as he looked out the window at three young women coming down the sidewalk. Mr. F. described a success story: he explained about how “rewarding it is when the students come back to visit us after they’ve graduated.” The secretary interrupted the interview. Mr. F. invited them to come in and say hello. “They’re attending community college and just wanted to say hello.” While the researcher was present, they thanked the principal for everything he had done for them.

The researcher asked Mr. F. on how he knew his program was successful, asking him to define success. Mr. F. elaborated, “Everyone wants success to be measured in ways other than graduation rates. The Board of Education wants to see improvements in participation/attendance numbers. Mr. F. outlined factors he believed bred success:

A. Teacher buy-in: Most teachers in the program come voluntarily. They want to be here. Last year, we hired 6 new teachers, and advertised the jobs as being here at the alternative program. People applied to be here. People see the value in their work, but they know how hard it is.
B. Principal also notes that staff development is necessary for cohesion. He has them read *Power of Peace*. Mr. F. states that the book outlines how to build a good PBIS program.

C. Mindfulness: during hiring and training, they vet people specifically as they will be good for the population.

D. The staff must have a sense of humor, and they have to teach it to the kids. They wear many hats and serve as therapists and counselors. There is a lot of teasing or kidding; humor builds relationships.

E. Teachers are encouraged to share and have the kids share (like in groups); stories of failures help the students relate to them.

F. They practice team building.

G. He has morning meetings with staff to plan/discuss what is working and what the issues are.

H. Building relationships: the whole school goes to breakfast. They talk with the kids and find out what the issues are before the day begins. Sometimes the assistant superintendent and other central administrative employees join them.

I. The whole program eats lunch together. Staff does not take their own lunch except to leave and get something to bring back.
   a. “Organized chaos.” Mr. F. describes this as bonding time with the kids and each other. Sharing a meal eases the tensions of the day. They have mindful conversations with the kids, meaning helping them to develop self-awareness of their triggers and alternatively seek what makes them successful/happy.

J. PBIS: The program employs a ticket bucket. Tickets can lead to free lunch with the principal. Some of the other options: pizza parties, ice cream socials, certificates of achievement. They are proud to bring their certificates home to show families.
   a. Principal reports that some of these kids have never won anything in their lives. Their families never gave them pizza parties or ice cream rewards.

The data from Mr. F.’s interview represents a major contour shift in the conceptual map. Mr. B. has a reward system offering pizza with the principal, but this idea of sharing two meals a day with them is a remarkable feature in the landscape. Mr. F. didn’t elaborate on this, but the researcher inferred that for those who come from broken homes with meager backgrounds to share breakfast and lunch with their teachers, counselors, and administrators proves to them that there are adults who care.

This simple act of sitting down for a meal provides structure and connection. The researcher learned that Dr. E. joins them for breakfast a few times a week. As a feature in the
map, one must consider how likely it would be for a student to be disruptive in a first period class after sharing the breakfast table with the teacher and principal. Having lunch together provides a moment of pause later in the day. If a student is stressed or having a hard time coping in morning classes, breaking from that classroom atmosphere to share a meal and have some downtime with teachers, peers, counselors and the principal diffuses those emotions. The meal-time conversations teach coping skills and relationship building.

Mr. J. reflected on how he defined success. “Most educators and the public want to see the numbers, and since this program started, there has been more than a ten-point increase in graduation rates. They hit a 94% graduation rate last year.” When pressed, however, Mr. J. elaborated. “Success is more personal. Far fewer are suspended now, and far fewer become non-completers or dropouts. Incidents of disciplinary action have decreased. Behavior is managed at the student level as it happens, and punishment is not the only option.”

The researcher asked Mr. J. for an anecdote of failure. “We do lose a few each year, but we actively go after students with repeated disciplinary issues to try and reach them. He called it ‘Stabilize relationships building.’” Mr. J. emphasized that a 94% graduation rate is not 100%. They do lose a few to 3214 who then drop out.” Mr. J. was reluctant to give a specific anecdote.

When asked about the factors of their success, Mr. J. elaborated.

A. Mindfulness is explored every day. The deans meet with them and explore why and how behavior arose. They explore what they should have chosen instead.
B. Mindfulness and restorative practices like reflections writing and apology letters are crucial.
C. Mr. J. offered that they don’t have a token system, but they have considered it. What they are doing now, Mr. J., qualified his remarks, is very successful.
D. After a moment’s reflection, Mr. J. added, “Another key factor is disciplinary incident reduction: I told the Middle School to stop sending files on their worst kids.” Mr. J. sends the deans and the Assistant Principal for 9th grade to the Middle School to meet their tough kids. He believes in a ‘come meet the kid’ approach, so they don’t arrive in 9th grade feeling like “their records have followed them.”
Mr. J. ended his remarks on this line of questioning back at graduation rates, “Ninety-four percent is not 100%, as I said, but it is still pretty good. We’re 10 points higher than we were before the superintendent started this program.”

Triangulating the map of the three principals’ answers reveals patterns in the landscape. They all are reluctant to use graduation rates as the only defining measure of success, but they all answer to central administration and the Boards of Ed who expect statistics and facts to share with the taxpayers. Each answer or anecdote provided contrasting contours, but they shared common features in the map, like relationship building, finding teachers who can make connections with disconnected students, and maintain non-traditional reward systems. The thoughts of the counselors and teachers provided bas relief of the topography as well.

Ms. C., the counselor at Pine Ridge, uses food and sitting for a meal as a pathway into her students’ world. She notes that the principal uses tokens for them to earn pizza parties, but she bakes for them when they complete course credit or make honor roll. Ms. C. believes this “is more powerful than the computer printed honor-roll certificates.” Parallel to the program in Chestnut Hill, Ms. C. runs a lunch group, “a subset of the neediest kids, and they respond well to the group. We talk about “what is in the ‘realm of your control.’” Ms. C. doesn’t find general strategies like mindfulness work well with this inner group of her neediest kids, but she states that, “Day to day needs are managed with individualized intervention.” Ms. C. didn’t state it, but similar to the researcher’s musings about the food programs at Chestnut Hill, Ms. C.s’ lunch group provides more family-style structure with a caring adult then they receive at home.

The researcher questioned Ms. C. further about specific stories of success and failure, and she shared a success story: “Sam was a senior who needed 10.5 credits. He had no support from home, and his self-image was very low. He had language barriers, but he found a connection in
the program. He felt that he belonged, and by the end he won an award at the Orange County Youth Bureau breakfast and went on to a State college.”

Mrs. K. didn’t share a specific failure story but commented on “how disheartened she becomes with every dropout.” She stated there were only two or three a year, usually kids who make poor life choices and get involved with drugs, but those are the ones who often leave and never come back.”

Ms. C., however insisted that the program as a whole is a success: “The program was performing between 80-90%, based upon those who were retained in the program and didn’t drop out.”

Ms. G. from Chestnut Hill, provided what are divergent contours of success defined. She describes success as “social emotional growth, and learning coping skills, which lead to improved attendance, which leads to academic success.” Ms. G. stated that “success is hard to quantify: students who learn to compensate for their issues often find an improvement in attendance and academic performance, but, for me, learning the social emotional skills were more important.” Asked about the factors that bring about success, Ms. G. outlined:

A. Faculty and staff buy-in is crucial to success.
   a. Our staff eats lunch with the kids. They don’t take prep periods. They are fully invested in the students.
B. Everyone in the program makes the effort to build relationships, to connect to the individual by focusing on his or her needs.
   a. Home visits and contact with families were good for building parent buy-in, which seemed to make the connections easier to build.
   b. Mindfulness, the counselor reports, is a big part of her practice. She and the social worker actively teach mindfulness, specifically distress tolerance and coping skills, building in ways that are individually tailored to the students.
C. Ms. G. believed that the PBIS reward system the principal developed works. She described the ticket system, where tickets are rewarded for attendance, kindness, and following the rules.
D. She feels the rate of recidivism is low in part because of the constant check-in with them. Ms. G. reports that many check-in on their own; they come to see her just to touch base.
E. Older kids take younger ones under their wing when they arrive at the program. “The maturity growth for the older kids when this happens is noticeable.”

Ms. G. explained that for those who stay in the program, they see a marked improvement in behavior issues. “There are sharply fewer disciplinary incidents here than in the main high school.” The researcher pressed Ms. G. on anecdotes of success and failure. Ms. G. provided: “In my first month in the job, a female student attacked a male student, slapping him, and the administration sent her to the counselor. The girl was very resistant: “I don’t know her; I don’t like her!” Ms. G. reports that the student is now her most regular visitor. She is her “most attached student.” Ms. G. described how she built rapport by fostering trust with the girl. The researcher noted that the counselor has been at the program for about a year, marking this as another example on the conceptual map: talent, not a learned skill.

As for an anecdote of failure, Ms. G. reported that many of her students are on probation, and she is required to share information with the probation office, often by court order. Ms. G. had to file reported on a student to the probation officer, and the student then came back to building very angry. He physically accosted the principal, and shouted that he wanted to “pop that counselor.” He was assigned a long-term suspension through the 3214 and has not returned. Ms. G. believed family court placed him in a juvenile facility.

Ms. G. reflected on “a few are out long-term suspension, perhaps six or seven.” Ms. G. stated, “Most who don’t return don’t complete high school after serious disciplinary events.” Ms. G. cited that the long-term suspensions are “almost always for violence or threats of violence.” When asked about the program as a whole, Ms. G. believes effectiveness as very high. “Out of 130 kids, 6 on suspension and 10-12 dropping out, leaves a high success rate for those who stay
in the program and get the interventions. For those who learn the coping skills and practice them, it makes all the difference.”

Ms. K in Ursa City felt she hadn’t been in the program long enough to comment on anecdotes of success or failure, but she did have features she that is confident lead to success:

A. A successful program has a strong restorative piece. “It is vital, especially for the repeat offenders. Restorative conferences, especially student-to-student, are often intense, requiring additional staff to support and control the environment.”

B. Restorative circles are an important element to an effective program. Often focusing on behavior issues that are deep, circles require building trust, building relations so there is a place where they feel safe. They have a feeling of comradery, where they’re not alone.

C. Ms. K. offered that restorative circles were important and should be frequent with freshmen. “They help to build connections and put to bed lingering middle school issues. She stated this makes the transition to high school much easier.”

D. Other adults need to join the circle. “The whole staff, everyone in the building is trained in the language of restorative practices. It helps everyone to connect.”

Ms. K. did feel that the program as a whole is effective. “The program is working, but it could be better with more teacher buy-in,” Ms. K. concluded her thoughts on effectiveness.

A conceptual map of the teachers’ answers provided parallel lines with the other respondents: relationship building, mindfulness, and connections with students and families.

Mr. H. from Chestnut Hill, provided an answer that created a contour in the landscape. He did not explore graduation rates or academic success. “Yes, we have kids in jail, but we gave them a chance and the district was behind it. This is their last chance, their last stop. It is a struggle because we lack a true target population. In the end, we try to be the fixer for all types of kids.”

All three schools, and all participants, reflected on those who leave, be it disciplinary matters, police matters, or obstructions in their lives. The percentages were small, meaning the percentages of those saved meets some common description of success like graduation, were very high. Mr. H.’s answer “When we turn out productive members of society,” provides an
interesting feature in the landscape. For the researcher, it is equally interesting that he has the most experience in Alt Ed of all respondents. Over the decades, he has worked in difficult places with juvenile criminals; he worked at the Railroad School, which was like jail. He was there when it failed and closed. When asked about the efficacy of the current program at Chestnut Hill, he responded, “We’re a 10!” Considering what he has seen in programs that were tried and failed, Mr. H.’s perspective provides a refreshing feature and bas relief in the topography of the data, and Mr. H.’s point answers the underlying motive for creating Alt Ed programs, the reason for this study. Alt Ed programs provide the opportunity for the at risk youth, often lost in the traditional mainstream programs, particularly in zero tolerance environments found in typical public schools, to find a place to learn to better their behavior, learn to be students, and most of whom graduate to a better life.

**Summary of Findings**

The researcher asked the participants were asked to place five indicators of success in order of importance, and they had the option to add a sixth of their choosing, if they felt another descriptor of success was important. The indicators of success to be ordered:

- Family Contact
- Teacher Buy-in or Care
- Individual Goal Setting
- Training, mindfulness or other interventions
- Restorative Justice, group or circle therapy
- Other

This chart triangulates their responses:
### Table 4.1

**Responses by Choice**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Importance to Program Success</th>
<th>Highest</th>
<th>1&lt;sup&gt;st&lt;/sup&gt; Choice</th>
<th>2&lt;sup&gt;nd&lt;/sup&gt; Choice</th>
<th>3&lt;sup&gt;rd&lt;/sup&gt; Choice</th>
<th>4&lt;sup&gt;th&lt;/sup&gt; Choice</th>
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<tr>
<td>Respondent</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Pine Ridge</strong></td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Principal Mr. B.</td>
<td>Teacher Buy-in/ Care</td>
<td>Family Contact</td>
<td>Individual Goal Setting</td>
<td>Training-Mindfulness/ Interventions</td>
<td>Restorative Justice</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Counselor Ms. C.</td>
<td>Teacher Buy-in/ Care</td>
<td>Teacher Buy-in/ Care (Ms. C. gave answer 2x for emphasis)</td>
<td>Individual Goals</td>
<td>Restorative Justice/ Therapy</td>
<td>Training-Mindfulness/ Interventions</td>
<td>Student Buy-In</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Teacher Ms. D.</td>
<td>Teacher Buy-in/ Care</td>
<td>Training-Mindfulness/ Interventions</td>
<td>Individual Goal Setting</td>
<td>Contact Families</td>
<td>Restorative Justice/ Therapy</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Chestnut Ridge</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Principal Mr. F.</td>
<td>Teacher Buy-in/ Care</td>
<td>Individual Goal Setting</td>
<td>Training-Mindfulness/ Interventions</td>
<td>Family Contact</td>
<td>Restorative Justice/ Therapy</td>
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<tr>
<td>Counselor Ms. G.</td>
<td>Individual Goal Setting</td>
<td>Teacher Buy-in/ Care</td>
<td>Family Contact</td>
<td>Restorative Justice Groups/ Therapy</td>
<td>Training-Mindfulness/ Interventions</td>
<td>Mentors Staff for students</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Teacher Mr. H.</td>
<td>Teacher Buy-in/ Care</td>
<td>Training</td>
<td>Individual Goal Setting</td>
<td>Family Contact</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Ursa City</strong></td>
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<tr>
<td>Principal Mr. J.</td>
<td>Individual Goal Setting</td>
<td>Restorative Justice Groups/ Therapy</td>
<td>Teacher Buy-in/ Care</td>
<td>Training-Mindfulness/ Interventions</td>
<td>Family Contact</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Counselor Ms. K</td>
<td>Training-Mindfulness/ Interventions</td>
<td>Teacher Buy-in/ Care</td>
<td>Restorative Justice/ Therapy</td>
<td>Individual Goal Setting</td>
<td>Family Contact</td>
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Most respondents believe teacher buy-in and care for their students are the most important features or descriptions of success. Contact with family, training, and setting individual goals were the next important features, while restorative justice and counseling/therapy were also important.

The administrators who participated in the study initially defined success in improved graduation rates. Building-level admins, teachers and counselors described success more broadly in-terms capturing improved attendance, changes in behavior, and changes in life circumstances. By the end of the interviews, all participants defined success on both a program level and a personal level. Dysfunction caused behavior issues or attendance issues, or both. It was a common feature causing the lack of academic success, and all participants described the importance of outreach, home visits, and community engagement. The contours of similarity in their answers was nearly universal: improved graduation rates and academic success were goals, but improved quality of life for the student was the imperative.

All nine respondents described programs that were fraught with peril at their start. Each program began with an administrator recognizing a need that was unfulfilled. Uncertainty, the need to build community coalitions and support, securing funding, and marked progression toward success after building good teams and overcoming the barriers were all common contours in the topography of Alt Ed in the sample schools. At the end of the data, the conceptual map showed different features and contour lines, but it is interesting to note, despite impediments,
hurdles, issues with the community, with funding, with the students and their families, all participants defined their own programs as successful.

**Chapter Summary**

This chapter reviewed the responses to interview questions from nine participants working in three schools that make up the sample for this study. Employing the theories of Uwe Flick (2007) from his *Designing Qualitative Analysis*, a metaphorical analysis of the responses, revealed common themes in the subject schools. Using the theories of Hemmer (2013) and Thurmond (2001), the researcher used triangulation to compare and contrast the responses to discover all participants felt their programs were saving kids, and that for them defined success. Chapter V will explore conclusions, and recommendations for additional study.
CHAPTER V: CONCLUSIONS, LIMITATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Discussion of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore how Alternative Educational Setting Programs that provide instruction to those who are unsuccessful in the traditional mainstream setting came into existence, how they function, and what the obstacles are for a more widespread adoption of such programs. Frequently, disciplinary and attendance issues cause the youth to be at risk for non-completion, or dropout risks. This study began with an exploration of how Zero Tolerance became the prevailing mode of conducting student discipline. Legislation requiring severe penalties for infractions, even minor infractions, created the culture of “be good or be gone.” Numerous court cases were adjudicated without significant easing of Zero Tolerance. Cultural shifts slowly indicated change as educators and community leaders began to search for solutions to low graduation rates and student attrition. This case study of three successful Alt Ed programs was conducted to evaluate other pathways youth at risk could follow to better lives through changes in behavior and newly found academic success.

Barriers to these programs were explored in the attempt to understand why such programs were not more prevalent. The history, structure, and behavior of the educators in the three schools chosen for having successful Alt Ed programs were examined. The researcher conducted face to face interviews of the principal, a guidance counselor, and a teacher from all three schools, and the responses were transcribed into a research journal that became the data set for the study. The fact that the names of the schools and the participants in the study remaining anonymous secured exempt status for this study with the IRB office at Albany University.

The researcher applied the theories associated with topographical analysis and triangulation (Flick, 2007; Lincoln, Gruba, & Roulston 1985; and Thurmond, 2001) to draw
comparisons and explore contrasting features to analyze the feedback from the interview questions in a research journal.

The respondents’ answers that comprised the data for this study were organized into three thematic lenses that were used to analyze the data: Obstacles to Implementation; Good Leadership; Effectiveness, demonstrated and defined. Findings from the study’s quantitative analysis indicate a general consensus that Alt Ed programs are good for students, for school districts, and by extension society. The responses contained more commonality than not, and, for the respondents, their programs are vital features of their school districts.

Results of the Study

This study began with an interest in a local alternative education, Alt Ed, program that was populated entirely with at risk youth who were on the verge of leaving high school without completing their courses of study because of disciplinary and attendance/avoidance issues. The researcher knew about the program, the only one in the county, and conducted a search for similar programs for the purposes of this study. The search was difficult as there were very few programs in existence. The researcher found a second program in a neighboring county, and a third several hours upstate. The proposal was granted exempt status by IRB at Albany University because the researcher provided protection for the identities of the respondents and their schools, and no student subjects were interviewed.

Pine Ridge, Chestnut Hill, and Ursa City were the names the researcher dubbed to the schools, the first rural, the second suburban, and the third urban, all of which provide Alt Ed to youth who struggle in traditional mainstream programs. Face to face interviews were scheduled, and interview questions ranged from the history of the programs, the impediments or barriers to establishing the programs, and the practices that create success. Initial contact started with a
Central Office administrator in the cases of Chestnut Hill and Ursa City. The mainstream high school principal in Pine Ridge was the point of initial point of contact for that program, as he started it years ago. The Alt Ed principal, an Alt Ed Guidance Counselor, and an Alt Ed teacher in each building were selected by the administrators who created their programs as interview subjects for this study.

The responses from each interview were transcribed in a research journal, with a recording as backup, and the researcher used triangulation (Thurmond, 2001) of the landscape topography (Flick, 2007; Lincoln & Gruba 1985; Roulston, 2013) the responses created. The responses drew many parallel lines of agreement between the schools and different respondents, but several contour shaped lines of contrast were revealed. The responses to the interview questions were examined under the lens of the research questions, and three themes emerged:

A. Obstacles to Program Implementation
B. Characteristics of Good Leadership
C. Standards of Effectiveness

The data categorized within the first theme, Obstacles, incorporated several interview questions and the second research question. All three schools, and every participant in those programs agreed: funding and securing support from the community and other educators were the biggest hurdles to inception. In Pine Ridge and Chestnut Hill, the founding administrators started small with remedial programs with modest budgets. As students found success, the reputations grew, until the community and institutional resistance was diminished enough for fully-funded programs to be launched. Lead administrators were hired, who in-turn hired faculty and staff that fit their visions for the program, and facilities were located to house them.

The process was very different in Ursa City. Like many urban schools, disciplinary issues were profound, attendance was poor, and academic performance was weak. A progressive
school board of education recruited a forward-thinking superintendent who had a vision for change. Dr. I. envisioned a different model for handling discipline, disruption, and absenteeism. He hired a like-minded principal, who in-turn hired three deans and a guidance counselor. Together, they enacted immediate changes to daily practices and built an Alt Ed program right within the mainstream school.

Staff development was conducted, where staff members were trained in restorative justice, like School Wide Positive Behavior Intervention Strategies, mindfulness, and restorative justice circles. Students returned from outside placements, where appropriate, and as teachers left or retired, the new administration replaced them with teachers who subscribed to the new mission.

Respondents from Ursa City reported there was culture shock, and some pockets of resentment still exist, but the success is evident. Interestingly, current versions of their programs started 8-10 years ago, and all three programs boast nearly 10% boost to their districts’ graduation rates. Another interesting point: all three programs host youth who struggle academically because of behavior issues, attendance issues, or both. Youth at risk who exhibit violence, using/selling drugs, and/or participating in other criminal behavior were not welcomed into the programs. Those youth faced 3214 Superintendent Removal proceedings, were remanded to home instruction or alternative placement, or were placed by courts in the juvenile justice system. Each participant assured the researcher that these cases were extreme and rare -- less than five a year.

The second theme, Good Leadership, captured several interview questions and the first research question, what is involved in creating an Alt Ed program? Once the first two obstacles are removed, staffing, training, and securing materials, supplies, and facilities are pedestrian
responsibilities of any building administrator. Having the insight, patience, creativity and stick-to-itiveness necessary to find the right faculty, to train them, and to navigate through the daily challenges of running an Alt Ed program servicing some of the districts’ most challenging students requires more from an administrator. Most of the respondents’ answers created parallel lines on the conceptual map by demonstrating the types of teachers and counselors who work with the children of Alt Ed.

All respondents agreed on the aforementioned qualities. The administrators looked for teachers who were not quick to punish and write disciplinary referrals. They sought the kind of men and women who could through compassion and understanding, perhaps humor, build relationships with the most vulnerable in the population. The characteristics necessary for the staff were doubly necessary for the leaders. All three leaders engaged their faculty in shared decision making.

All three principals held regular meetings to openly discuss issues and search for collaborative solutions. The leaders not only embodied but exemplified the characteristics necessary to support the Alt Ed population. Principal F. referred to “flexing the code of conduct.” He relied on his teachers for insight and corroboration. He considered Mr. H. a mentor because of his decades of experience. Principals B. and F. both had a small core or at times a single person with whom to confer. Both Mr. B. and Mr. F. found ways within the code to work with students through token economies, in which they could earn points towards rewards like pizza with the principal. Good leaders lead but also follow. They rely on their teams. They share the wins and the losses, and they listen.

The third theme, Standards of Effectiveness, captured the third research question verbatim, but the researcher extended the scope of the question by having the respondents define
success. Initially, respondents relied on the defaults: academic progress/graduation rates. The improved graduation rate in each building as a result of the success of the program is undeniable, but every respondent dove deeper into defining success. The principals were proud to cite anecdotes of success. The counselors sought changes in behavior. The teachers spoke of more immediate successes, like individual academic improvement, improved attendance. All participants spoke about the students becoming better people. Mr. H. from Chestnut Hill answered perfectly: “My measure of success is that we have turned out productive members of society.” Each program still had a few lost to violence, drugs, or insurmountable issues at home, but for the 3-5 lost each year to crime, these educators rescued dozens of at risk youth every year.

Not captured in the data analysis is the fourth research question: Why aren’t there more programs? The researcher scratched the surface with the final interview question that asked the respondents to give advice to other educators who might wish to start a program. All of the respondents' answers formed parallel lines on the conceptual map. There was little room to triangulate differences:

- Find other programs. Ask them questions and network with them.
- Build relationships to face institutional and community bias.
- Hire the right staff and collaborate with them.
- Offer staff development to all adults in restorative justice, social emotional training, trauma, crisis management, mindfulness, and SWPBIS.

The answer to why there are not more programs soon became clear: all three schools had a charismatic and powerful administrator with a particular vision who formed their programs. In Chestnut Hill and Ursa City, the assistant superintendent and superintendent, respectively, pioneered their programs. They had the institutional power, the permission of the Boards of Ed, and the authority over the faculty to make the decisions, to fund and operate the programs. In the
case of Pine Ridge, the mainstream building principal started small, and the volume of his years of success won support and funding over time. Without a charismatic leader to champion the program, assure stakeholders that academic standards will be met, recruit the right people, and surmount every barrier to success, districts do not spend $1 million or more on students the stakeholders believe cannot behave, who do not attend school regularly. Alt-Ed programs cannot be sustained unless dedicated and committed leadership is sustained. The State Education Department could highlight existing programs to recognize them and to promote the positive elements for the public, but without public support and a visionary leader, the Alt-Ed programs will not become common.

**Limitations to the Study**

Upon reflecting, the researcher discovered limitations, due largely to the interview process. In all three cases, the administrator responsible for creating the program guided the researcher to interview educators working in the program who had strikingly positive impact. In each case, the Alt Ed principal was a veteran who had chosen staff to meet the vision. In one case, the counselor was a veteran, but in the other two counselors were relatively new. In the case of the teachers, two were long-term veterans in the programs since they were started. The third teacher was new, but completely invested.

All participants were completely committed to vision, the pathways of restorative justice, building relationships, and saving youth at risk from non-completion. Everyone the researcher was granted permission to interview was a program member with fidelity. If the researcher had access to the educators who resisted the changes or still felt the money could be better spent, the researcher may have found clearer answers to the question that initiated the study: If Alternate Education programs are successful why aren’t there more of them? But be that as it may, it is
clear that most Alt-Ed programs succeed in idiosyncratic ways with high, perhaps complete, dependence on committed charismatic leadership, and little in the way of generic evidence that could be easily scaled up.

**Recommendations for Further Study**

Alt Ed programs like the schools in this study are not prevalent because few districts have that visionary administrator who is able to rise above the barriers to meet the need. The *be good or be gone* mentality is embedded in American culture. School Boards are unlikely to create policy to solve the problem without such leaders. Ursa City’s School Board searched for such a leader. Further study should be conducted into why successful Alt Ed programs are rare. Studies should also be done to examine administrator training programs in higher education. The researcher has posited that the traits of visionary leaders may be personality marks rather than developed skills, but with the right focus and instruction, perhaps the rare instructional leaders would be revealed.

The researcher reflected on the notion of race, and how it may affect the implications of Alt Ed programs, particularly considering how important racial justice is in America today. The leaders of Pine Ridge and Chestnut Hill reported that in their Alt Ed programs, no group was disproportionately represented, and they further stated that the demographics of the Alt Ed populations mirrored their mainstream demographics. At Ursa City, the Alt Ed students are not separated from the mainstream as a daily practice, so Alt Ed services are a continuum offered in tandem with regular mainstream program.

On a national level, research demonstrates that race is a factor in the school to prison pipeline phenomenon (Nolan, 2011; Fuentes, 2011; Ayers, Dohrn, & Ayers, 2001). This research suggests that in schools where students from minority groups are disproportionately subjected to
punitive discipline, Alt Ed programs may have the capacity to be constructed to lead to a reduction in the school to prison pipeline for those populations, but further study is needed to affirm this proposition.

**Policy and Practitioner Recommendations**

Creating Alt Ed programs on a broad scale lies with the authority of the State Education Department. Until State Education requires districts to provide equitable instruction for all students, Alternative Education Programs for youth with disciplinary issues and school avoidance issues, youth at risk for dropout, will not become commonplace. Society has been content to tolerate a level of non-completion, and, without State mandates and teacher/administrator education programs in colleges and universities focusing on this population, society may never target this need.

Practitioners such as principals and superintendents need to be reminded that leadership is imperative for implementation of quality Alt Ed programs. The findings of this study underscore the need for collaboration and stakeholder support for program success.
Conclusion

This graphic demonstrates the pathway of support to having a program or the lack of support that prevents programs from being established:

Figure 5.1

Pathway of Support

Until broader measures are taken, the exigent problem of resolving the reasons youth at risk become dropouts or non-completers persists. It is a societal issue because 82% of incarcerated inmates are high school drop-outs. Each of the Alt Ed programs in this study affected student behavior and, in doing, so turned around scores of students socially and academically. The researcher does not mean that all those who drop out of school will go to prison, but the success of Alternative Education in the schools of this study demonstrates that measures can be taken in
teaching youth at risk coping skills to amend their behavior, which enables them to stay in school and graduate. The three case study schools demonstrate that Alt Ed programs are effective and should be a common tool to disrupt the school to prison pipeline.
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Appendix A  Research Journal

This Appendix is a summary of the interviewee’s responses to the researcher’s questions during face to face interviews. The summary has verbatim quotes where respondents emphasized important features of their responses.

Interview Prompts with Responses

Interview Question 1
Describe the history of Your School’s Alternative Education Program.

Pine Ridge High School, Mr. B., Alt Ed Principal

- Mr. A. started the program 8 years ago to capture kids falling through the cracks. The dynamic of the kids changed.
- Initially, we had kids with heavy disciplinary records. There were substance abuse issues, drug sales, and even prostitution for drugs.
- Over the years, the culture of the school changed and we’re not seeing those heavy crimes as much. The suspension rate has declined, and the graduation rate has increased by as much as 8% points since the program began.
- Today, in the program, we’re seeing a lot more of credit recovery. We started focusing on 9th grade with counselors and teachers, so the program is now just 10-12th graders.
- We did not work off of a model. We created a program and modified it as we saw fit.
- The superintendent gave Mr. A. wide control, and he hired me specifically to run the alternative program.
- The focus for success was primarily graduation rates, and it runs concurrent to the regular school day, just in a separate wing of the building. There is a summer academy for credit recovery as well.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. F., Alt Ed Principal

- There are 130 pupils in the program that started out as credit recovery.
- The kids would attend for 40 hours in their 5th and 6th year of their cohort to graduate. The original program was called “Railroad Ave Program.” It was like an old jailhouse building. “The kids were hard core; today’s kids are softies compared to them.”
- That program started in 1994, and it was focused on Special Education and GED. They found their way to the program because of behavior issues, attendance, school phobia… it was credit recovery with a number of transients from other states or countries who had not completed enough Regents credits. There were those who needed Academic Intervention Services, but it was too little too late.
The assistant superintendent reinvented everything to create the current alternative program.

We developed early intervention for 9th grade, with a triple block: English 9/10; math/science; social studies/elective.

After a year, they had more traditional 9th graders in the program. They earned 7.5-8 credits, and we were able to build a more traditional structure.

We did not have a model; we created it together.

Students with poor attendance or who were floundering led them to be credit deficient. Some requested to be in the program as they knew they were floundering. It is a smaller setting, and kids know they develop relationships with their teachers in the program.

Those with serious discipline issues do not come to our alt program. Those here have more chronic discipline issues: cutting school, cutting class, attendance or truancy issues. Students here are not really violent: there are 3-4 fights a year in the alternative program.

The district has another program nicknamed it the Group Home that runs from 3-5 pm for those who have long-term suspensions for serious disciplinary issues.

Students who do get into trouble here and earn short-term suspension from our program are entitled to go to the 3-5 program to get tutoring.

The 3-5 program has 4 core classes and a special education class. The regular teachers provide the work and tutors provide the instruction.

Ursa City, Mr. J., High School Principal

Prior to the arrival of the current superintendent who created the program, the high school utilized Out of School Suspension, In School Suspension, After School Detention, and Lunch Detention as most traditional high schools employ across the state.

“The superintendent came to the district, recruited by the Board of Education. He brought changes to the district, particularly in how discipline is managed at the high school.” The elements that make a successful alternative program were infused into the DNA of the high school.

Disciplinary practices changed, people were trained, and the program has been evolving for the past 7 years.

The superintendent hired the principal and they developed the program under the superintendent’s vision.

There are 1400 pupils in the high school, and the “new superintendent abolished In School Suspension. Out of School Suspensions have been greatly reduced to only the most serious of cases:” violence, drugs, and the like, and home instruction is provided in those cases, until the student is permitted to return.

For a 1-60 day suspension, an administrator meets with parents and the student. They explore why the student found him- or herself in trouble. They explore what was not working and what can be done for the student to be successful upon his or her return.
The administrator discusses with the parents a plan for the two hours a day the student will receive home tutoring, and they set up communication lines so the tutor, the administrator, and the teachers can remain in contact.

Mr. J. could not recall an example in his tenure of a longer than 60 day suspension.

- The philosophy behind abolishing the ISS was: “If you step out of line, you don’t get to hide in isolation in the ISS room; you face it.”
- They focus on relationship building and teaching them to address behaviors that would have led to isolation.
- Lunch detentions shifted to lunch reflections, where offending youth get lunch reflection for improper language use or minor disruptions. They write reflections during this time, examining why and how they behaved the way that they did.
- The goal - but not a requirement - would be for the student to compose an apology note to whomever would be appropriate for the behavior that precipitated the assigning of lunch reflection.
- After-school detention was reduced to a parent or guardian meeting with the student and administration. The purpose is for the student to internalize what is wrong with the behavior, and the school seeks to partner with a caring adult to help the student learn a better way of conducting himself or herself.

The model used to implement the program was a 2018 book, written by Lovelle Brown, *Culture of Love: Cultivating a Positive and Transformational Organizational Culture*.

The principal explored what drove the change: years ago, the district had a separate facility for long-term suspensions. It operated like an alternative location high school for disciplinary cases. The Board of Education came to believe that the program was not worth the prohibitive expenses.

District personnel became skeptical because the rate of recidivism seemed to promote bad behavior.

The perception was, those who didn’t want to be in the day program would disrupt to be sent to the alternative program or to receive home instruction.

The cost was prohibitive, and shareholders felt there was no accountability for behavior.

That version of alternative education was not demonstrating growth.

Then, there were 30-40 students in the alternative program, receiving instruction.

Today, a key 5-7 students meets with the principal regularly, focusing on progress. “I don’t want them to believe we’re throwing them out and don’t care about them.” This can be a powerful tool.

The principal explained the need to change the mindset. “Words like insubordinate are emotionally laden terms, and when we dig deeper, we see implicit bias. The faculty and staff need training, and we do employ *The Culture of Love*.
Pine Ridge, Ms. C. Alt Ed Guidance Counselor

- Ms. C. was not familiar with how the program started.
- 5 years ago she filled a maternity leave and then just became the counselor in the program.
- She remembers it was initially a credit recovery for those with disciplinary issues, but it has since evolved to be a safe space for youth who have school anxiety, which manifests itself in disciplinary and academic failure.
- Ms. C. envisions the program as a school within a school.

Chestnut Hill, Ms. G., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor

- Ms. G. is a first-year counselor and graduated from the Chestnut Hill mainstream program a few years ago.
- Ms. G. recalls the “Railroad” school. Those who went there had issues with fights and violence, weapons, or drugs. She recalls pregnant kids going to the credit recovery 3-5 program.
- Public perception of that program was awful. It was considered on the same level as a jail. She remembers that the district wanted to rebrand the image.
- They closed the Railroad building and combined the programs here in this elementary school that also houses the district offices.
- Ms. G. chose to work in the Alt Ed program; she applied specifically for it.
- Ms. G. likes the smaller setting, and has come to know the kids well. She has about 100 who check in with her daily/regularly.

Ursa City, Ms. K., High School Guidance Counselor

- Ms. K. is new to the program.
- In her previous school, she participated in programs with restorative justice, restorative circles, mindfulness, and social justice to a greater degree than she has observed here at Ursa City.
- Ms. K. believes that can contribute to developing the programs here. She explained the history of the superintendent and what she had heard about the program here, but she hasn’t witnessed enough yet to see what is working vs. what needs to be modified.

Pine Ridge, Ms. D., Alt Ed Teacher

- Ms. D. described what she knew about the program. She has been in the district for 25 years, and she was glad to be asked to provide instruction in the program.
- Ms. D. knew that the high school principal started the program, but has since hired someone to be the program principal under him.
• Having the space to provide instruction apart from the main high school is fortunate. It gives them a place to focus, and it gives separation from the teachers who had trouble with those in the program.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. H., Alt Ed Teacher

• Mr. H. has been in the alternative program since the beginning. He described something called Project Free which was self-contained, focused on providing Regents prep. Electives were added, which caused problems but he and the others struggled to make it work.
• The district then merged Project Free with what the principal described as the Railroad Program.
• That program had tough disciplinary kids in it, and the good kids often got pushed out. They tried a blended model, with co-teaching and consultant teacher methods, but it didn’t bring results.
• The Assistant Superintendent E. brought his vision to bear, and he and the principal forged the current Alt Ed program.

Ursa City, Mr. L., High School Teacher

• Mr. L. explained that he’s been in the school for about 2 years.
• Prior, he had 10 years of experience in New York City and in Los Angeles, and he saw firsthand the behavior that leads to harsh consequence models.
• Mr. L. believed that the program has been in existence for 7 years, and it was developed by the principal and the superintendent.
• He believed that his past experiences helped him to be hired because he has worked in difficult settings.

Interview Question 2
Describe How the Alternative Program in your school is funded.

Pine Ridge, Mr. B., High School Principal

• The alternative program has a separate line in the budget of $14,000. This money is for field trips, supplies, textbooks and equipment.
• Salaries for staff come out of the general High School budget. Considering there are 5 teachers, some push-in teachers for electives, a counselor, a principal and facilities use. Salaries alone push the price tag close to $1 million.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. F, Alt Ed Principal

• The principal described how the funding is tied to the main campus, an extension of the high school. They use the same BEDS codes.
• Our Alt program has 8 full-time teachers. They also have part time teachers who travel for certain electives.
• A guidance counselor and a psychologist are on staff.
• We have a social worker, a security person, and a secretary.
• The program is located in a wing of the Central Administration Building, so the custodial staff is already in place.
• Students are bussed in from their homes, though there are a few walkers. A small number are permitted to drive.
• The budget for the Alt Ed program is a subset of the High School budget, though the assistant superintendent who helped to build the program finds grant money for programs like Character Education.

Ursa City, Mr. J., High School Principal
• A few additional administrators and a counselor were added, but beyond those needs, there is no further cost.
• They are educated here in the mainstream high school, and that includes their social and emotional education. When they make a mistake, we deal with it; we do not ship them out.

Pine Ridge, Ms. C. Alt Ed Guidance Counselor
• Ms. C. didn’t know much about funding or salaries, and she referred the researcher to the principal.

Chestnut Hill, Ms. G., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor
• Ms. G believes that the funding is plentiful. She doesn’t know about salaries and costs like the principal does, but she says the flow of materials is good.
• Use of the building is comfortable. Sharing with the central administration took time getting used to it.
• The facility is good except the cafeteria/kitchen is too small. The breakfast program is always wonderful, but lunch is limited.

Ursa City, Ms. K, High School Guidance Counselor
• Ms. K did not know much about the funding of the program.
• She knew they hired some extra administrators, and she believes she was hired because of her experiences in her previous school with restorative justice.
Pine Ridge, Ms. D., Alt Ed Teacher

- Ms. D. didn’t know about the funding beyond there were teachers, a principal, a guidance counselor, and a separate part of the building to run the program.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. H., Alt Ed Teacher

- Mr. H. replied, “At times, funding was tough. There were teacher layoffs.
- People throughout the district thought the alternative programs were not cost effective, and at one point before the programs were combined, the pm credit recovery program was closed.
- There were big issues with attendance and discipline followed.

Ursa City, Mr. L., Teacher

- Mr. L. explained that he didn’t know much about the funding for the program or how the positions that were added.

Interview Question 3

Describe how staffing and hiring decisions are made.

Pine Ridge, Mr. B., Alt Ed Principal

- There are 5 teachers teaching core classes.
- There are a few support staff, and more or less are determined by IEPs or needs.
- There is a guidance counselor, and the Spanish, Tech, PE and Art departments from the high school each pick up one period for electives.
- The people here are chosen by the high school principal.
- New teachers are not chosen. The staff needs some experience in talking to and dealing with tough kids. Just writing referrals and throwing them out of class is unproductive.
- The program needs a separate location -- we have a wing to ourselves. The kids are out of the population, and cutting class is very hard because of the adult/student ratio.
- The right staff is important. They have to be willing/able to deal with our kids. There is a perception among the main high school staff that the kids in our program are dysfunctional, so the principal has to recruit heavily. Mr. A. focuses on teachers he thinks connect with the type of student in the program.
- The 5 teachers we have in the core are very stable and have been here for years, but that poses a problem with turn-over, mainly from retirement.
- It is hard to change the perception of the staff, particularly since the electives rotate.
- Janitorial services are completed by the regular staff. They service us as routine with the main building.
Chestnut Hill, Mr. F, Alt Ed Principal

- Teacher recruitment is coordinated with between himself, the assistant superintendent, and the high school principal.
- Teachers with the right mindset to work with these at-risk populations are tapped to work in the program, but often teachers apply to come to the program.

Ursa City, Mr. J., High School Principal

- An assistant principal was assigned to Curriculum, and another to Student Life.
- A new assistant principal was hired just to manage freshmen.
- Three deans were hired and assigned to sophomores, juniors, and seniors working under the Student Life assistant principal.
- The deans build “Pipelines of the Future.” They serve as graduation coaches, and they facilitate meetings with administration for disciplinary incidents as they arrive.
- Additionally, deans find food and clothing, as many of the children we serve are needy. They work with the parents who historically would be involved in disciplinary proceedings. They are life coaches.
- There is a change in focus, culturally. It is not 3 guys doling out punishment. They cultivate relationships, find resources, and support the families.
- Mr. J. described the disciplinary process.
- The deans handle minor discipline and the reflection process described earlier. The deans are not trained administrators, so they don’t provide consequences.
- The deans deal with behavior, what’s causing it. They teach them how to avoid it.
- When the time comes for discipline, the principals get involved.
- The head principal is involved with the more challenging ones. The relationship with the deans helps to mitigate the meetings for punishment.
- The rest of the high school teaching staff remained unchanged, but they did add a counselor to assist with these students.

Pine Ridge, Ms. C. Alt Ed Guidance Counselor

- Ms. C. described what she knew about recruitment.
- They pick teachers who understand these kids.
- Many are from free and reduced lunch families with no home support.
- Ms. C. shared an anecdote of a parent who felt defeated and actually said to her that she (Ms. C.), needed to fix the student because he is in her program now: mom’s last hope for him.
- Ms. C. noted that the principal looks for a particular style of classroom management in his teachers, the kind of person who can handle some level of insubordination and turn it
around themselves without kicking the kid out of class and making everything a disciplinary referral.

Chestnut Hill, Ms. G., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor
- Ms. G. has only been in the program a year, and she applied directly to the position.
- She wasn’t sure how other faculty and staff had been hired, but she noted that the faculty needed to have a good disposition to work with this population.

Ursa City, Ms. K, High School Guidance Counselor
- Ms. K remarked, “As I answered for #2, I don’t know much about the staffing and hiring. I just came here a few months ago.”

Pine Ridge, Ms. D., Alt Ed Teacher
- Ms. D. knew that the teachers, principal, and counselor chosen for the program were recruited by the high school Principal, Mr. A., who started the program.
- Certain personalities, people who could work with the population, were selected.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. H., Alt Ed Teacher
- Mr. H. gave an anecdote of how he arrived: “I applied to this program at the start. I had worked in the previous remedial programs in the district, and this time they called me in to help develop it.”
- Mr. H. expanded upon his thoughts: “In the past, teachers with low seniority or teachers who had call backs after the budget cuts worked the program.” Mr. H. described this thinking as the “traditional model” and compared it to the “new model.”
- With the new design, students and staff want to be there. “The program is so popular and successful now that many teachers apply directly to work here. Many were young and inexperienced, but we have a good team.”
Ursa City, Mr. L., High School Teacher

- Mr. L. described that he was hired, but it wasn’t for a separate alternative program. He was hired to work in the English department, under this mixed model, by the superintendent.
- Mr. L. wasn’t sure about the high school staffing, material purchases, or janitorial services. To him, it seemed to run like a normal school, though “I know we are working in a different model of student discipline and engagement.”

Interview Question 4
Describe the recruitment or selection of students for your Alternative Education Program.

Pine Ridge, Mr. B., Alt Ed Principal

- Students are placed here by counselors and administration.
- In 9th grade, counselors begin to identify candidates who are not fitting into the general program.
- There is a circle: disciplinary matters lead to academic issues and attendance issues. The program runs 10th-12th grade, and graduation is the priority. Seniors trying to graduate, credit recovery, are the most important focus points of the program.
- We have about 50 youth at the moment, and that is a decent average.
- If a student is a true hard case, like a long-term suspension, there is another level to the program. There is pure credit recovery offered after-school for violent youth, so those kids are more isolated.
- They ride in on the busses that are going make the regular run home from the mainstream school, and we bring them down to the program wing.
- The day Alt Ed program kids are the type with disciplinary records for cutting class, insubordination, language abuse, etc.
- Kids with attendance issues and school phobia have done well here in the program, but recruiting them is hard. We’ve done home visits, like wellness checks with the social workers and law enforcement. Once they learn they can be in the small class setting and get much more attention from the teachers and counselors, they come. Trust is built, and they find success.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. F., Alt Ed Principal

- The principal sees student recruitment as a “critical path.”
- Guidance Counselors in the high school are the first round of filters. They make recommendations, but many students self-select.
- The kids in the Alt Ed program have their issues. They are at risk but not necessarily 3214 or long-term suspension kids.
- The principal noted that he tries to avoid long-term suspension with the youth at risk in the alternative program because they are already far behind their peers. He feels it is better for them to be here in the program.
• The principal noted altering the discipline mindset is necessary to work with these kids. “I can flex the code of conduct because this is already an alternative setting.”
• The principal also makes agreements with the counselors and administration in the main school to accept probationary students, those who could be long-term suspended but come to the alternative program for a time to see if it is effective before they're officially placed.
• There is a 3-5 pm credit recovery program for hard disciplinary cases or kids with such school phobia or family circumstances that they have no other alternative.

Ursa City, Principal Mr. J., High School Principal
• Mr. J.: “recruitment of students? They are already in the building, but those who act up engage with the deans and principals.”

Pine Ridge, Ms. C., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor
• Youth in the program tend to have truancy issues, cut class, are insubordinate in the regular class setting.
• These students feel lost in the crowd and develop school avoidance behaviors. Ms. C. describes them as escapees.
• For discipline and eligibility, it is a case by case decision. She asks a series of intake questions starting with “who do you know downstairs in the program and why do you know them?” She continues asking them “why do they think they might want to come to the program?”
• She meets with administrators, who know the student, and a decision is made balancing the criterion, and they are offered a spot.

Chestnut Hill, Ms. G., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor
• Ms. G reports that they come to the alternative placement program via several channels.
• Most are recommended by administration of guidance counselors at the day program.
• Youth with attendance issues that led to disciplinary issues, like truancy and school phobia, are frequently recommended.
• Students on PINS (Persons in Need of Supervision) are at times assigned here by the courts/probation.
• Those with multiple failures and in need of credit recovery come to the program, particularly if they have fallen behind their cohort. The counselor described the population as mixed.
• There were others in the program for disciplinary concerns, like fighting. There are a few here who needed to be separated from fights/conflicts at the mainstream high school.
Ms. G. emphasized that the alternative program was not intended to be a permanent placement. They are supposed to recover their credits, and learn success in an environment with smaller classes so they could learn to foster relationships with teachers. They learn to be students, and then return to the day program, but it is rare that happens. They build confidence and want to stay.

Currently the counselor feels about 15% transition back to the main high school. She reports that they self-sabotage because they don’t want to leave the alternative program.

Ms. G. feels that they gain positive experiences, learn to trust their teachers, and find academic success, which makes them want to come to school. This also prevents them from wanting to return to the mainstream where they were not successful.

Ursa City, Ms. K., High School Guidance Counselor

Ms. K was very familiar with the at-risk youth recruited for alternative education from within the mainstream of Ursa City High School, but she noted that they are part of the mainstream, so she described how it works.

She had been involved with several out of program placements: “Kids with particularly difficult discipline issues face 3214 hearings, but that is rare.

In our mainstream program common infractions are handled between her office and the deans. She and the other guidance counselors are often the first line of defense.”

Ms. K reports that in her previous school, restorative practices dovetail with disciplinary measures, but in this program, restorative practices are the first line of approach.

Ms. K has found restorative conferences and circles work well, but notes that disciplinary elements should not be circumvented. Even in restorative circles, the damage of the behavior must be addressed.

As a person new to the school, she plans to develop these practices.

They are sent from classes for disruption or disrespectful behavior, and counselors and social workers explore with the child problem-solving techniques.

Ms. K and other counselors seek why the child and the teacher are on opposite sides of the perspectives of what happened, and they try to have the student see the other perspective. If this is successful, they are returned to class.

Mindfulness is a key piece of the work at this level.

Ms. K explored the process: problem-solve, teach the child the adults’ perspective, and if this didn’t work, if the problem was repetitive or persistent, or if the student could not get past their own perspective, the deans would be involved to take the problem to the next level.

Ms. K reported that the deans engage the students in seeking to reflect in the reflective room. They talk with them and work as intermediaries before administration becomes involved.
Ms. K reported that restorative conferences often involve the teacher, and this is useful to resolve misunderstandings. The counselors work to restore relationships.

C emphasized the restorative piece: “In other schools, students would be moved out of classes where there were repetitive issues, but in this program they learn to work through their problems.”

Pine Ridge, Ms. D., Alt Ed Teacher

- Ms. D. answered that they were chosen for the program because they had issues in the main high school.
- Repeat offenders and kids who just couldn’t come to school were the prime focus.
- Some students who got into deeper trouble were offered spots as well, but she knew that they who faced long-term suspensions for serious offenses didn’t get offered the program. They went to credit recovery in the evening program or home instruction.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. H., Alt Ed Teacher

- Mr. H. described the students who populate the Alt Ed program: They vary from year to year. Sometimes they had 3214 hearings. Some were pregnancies, while others had various disciplinary issues.
- Most struggle with attendance and truancy. This year he has noticed that there are some “really bright students who just don’t attend school.” He has a few with lower IQs or who suffer from social/emotional issues, but “they come to love the relationships they find in the program.”
- Mr. H. lamented one group that is still lost: “BOCES level kids who struggle with attendance, still have no place to fit in.”

Ursa City, Mr. L., High School Teacher

- Mr. L. explained, “They aren’t recruited. They are here. We don’t send them out for discipline issues, unless they are really significant.”

Interview Question 5

**How do you know when the program is successful; define success.**

Pine Ridge, Mr. B., Alt Ed Principal

- The program is a tremendous success.
- In 8 years, our graduation rates at the mainstream high school went from the mid 80’s% to 91%. Last year, 27 of 29 seniors graduated, and we are on pace for the same number this year, but it can’t just be about graduation rates only. It is good for kids.
The program has changed the trajectory of their lives, especially if they get a diploma. The 3214 kids usually go to the after school credit-recovery program, but the kids who come to the alternative program are met where they are.

We tailor individual programs to the kids and focus on what they need. There are key factors to the success:

- The home visits prove we care.
- We have a token economy where kids can earn tokens or lose them, based on attendance and honor-roll/grades, and the tokens can be used to buy special lunches.
- Teacher buy-in -- the current staff is very interested in helping these students, and the fact that the regular education teachers see them come back to day school or graduate with their peers spreads positive vibes for the program and for these kids who were the antithesis of students as freshmen.
- Administration supports and praises the teachers who go the extra mile for the kids. This creates a positive environment and strong rapport.
- Team meetings every two weeks promote that rapport. We discuss what is working, what is not; we share ideas and plans, to complete a reflection and review.
- We promote field-trip Fridays to keep the kids engaged. We’ve been to West Point, Storm King Arts Center, SUNY Orange for tours to pique their interests in post high school opportunities. We’ve been to Hudson Community College to participate in an Escape Room activity for team building. Once they find success and develop relationships with teachers and each other, they don’t want to return to the main building.
- Work-based projects: 5-6 businesses in our community host students as interns in a model similar to CTEC at BOCES. The kids love getting out of the building to learn skills and develop relationships with adults in the community. This happens on Fridays.
- Mindfulness: we actively teach buy-in. Different elements are explored for individual kids. They are actively taught self-respect. This is done individually and in groups, often with the guidance counselor who runs a lunch group. Guest speakers are often presented: a push for them to learn their own triggers and how to manage them builds self-control.
- PBIS efforts are done through the token economy, and they write social contracts with the kids, being up front with their behavior.
- Faculty who work with these students receive additional staff development. The principal likes the Hawthorne book: Teacher’s Resource Guide 4th Ed. The book provides insight to patterns of behavior and gives possible solutions to many scenarios. The teachers are actively trained in Response to Intervention (RTI), which means they are managed as individuals because the numbers allow for that individual attention.
- In addition to increasing graduation rates, the principal runs discipline reports and looks at the discipline statistics. As the youth become more successful in the program, mainly the longer they’re in it, the frequency of incidents decreases drastically. There are a few who wash out of the program. Last year we had 3, but one returned to try again this year.
There are not a lot of restorative justice initiatives beyond some mindfulness work with the counselor in her group. She spends a lot of time with the students developing their self-worth and coping strategies.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. F, Alt Ed Principal

- Not everything can be measured by increased graduation rates; that is an incomplete measurement. Success is more intangible: are they coming to school? If so, they’ve improved on their truancy school phobia issues. Did they pass a class that they previously failed?
- Mr. F loves when graduates return to visit the program and share their stories of college and careers.
- “Success is hard to measure, but if you see a change in student behavior where the old behaviors don’t exist and their attendance is up, that is success.
- Publically, the kids say they want to return to the day program, but because of the relationships they’ve built, 98% want to stay.
- Last year, 20 seniors went back to the day program and every one of them graduated.
- Mr. F made a particular remark about assessments: we get them to complete the classes and then Regents exams hold them back. Often it is a language barrier issue.
- Graduation rate is hard to measure between the two buildings: the high school will send him seniors in March in an attempt to get them to graduate in June. It is hard to develop those relationships in so short a time. Mr. F considers it a compliment when they do graduate.
- There is a proposal where he will receive more from the 3-5 program to take 40 hours of credit recovery before summer school to bump the graduation rate.
- Though everyone wants success to be measured in ways other than graduation rates, the Board of Education wants to see improvements in numbers. He doesn’t know how this will work.
  - Teacher buy-in: Central administration is good at recruiting, and most teachers in the program come voluntarily. They want to be here. Last year, we hired 6 new teachers, and advertised the jobs as being here at the alternative program. People applied to be here. People see the value in their work, but they know how hard it is.
  - Mindfulness: during hiring and training, they vet people specifically as they will be good for the population. The staff must have a sense of humor, and they have to teach it to the kids. They wear many hats and serve as therapists and counselors. There is a lot of teasing or kidding; humor builds relationships.
- Teachers are encouraged to share and have the kids share (like in groups); stories of failures help them relate.
- They practice team building. He has morning meetings with staff to plan/discuss what is working and what the issues are.
• Building relationships: the whole school goes to breakfast. They talk with the kids and find out what the issues are before the day begins. Sometimes the Assistant Superintendent Dr. E. and other central administrative employees join them.
• The whole program eats lunch together. Staff does not take their own lunch except to leave and get something to bring back.
• “Organized chaos.” Mr. F. describes this as bonding time with the kids and each other. Sharing a meal eases the tensions of the day. They have mindful conversations with the kids, meaning helping them to develop self-awareness of their triggers and alternatively seek what makes them successful/happy.
• PBIS: The program employs a ticket bucket. Teachers give tickets, and the kids bring them to the principal. Tickets can lead to free lunch with the principal. Some of the other options: pizza parties, ice cream socials, certificates of achievement. They are proud to bring their certificates home to show families.
• Principal reports that some of these kids have never won anything in their lives. Their families never gave them pizza parties or ice cream rewards.
• The principal noted that there is not a lot of diversity in the program. Until very recently, the kids were mostly white. He has 2 Hispanic teachers and he himself is African American. The reason he pointed this out was the connection with kids and their stories should be more important than race.
• Principal also notes that staff development is necessary for cohesion. Has them read Power of Peace. -- a good PBIS program book.

Ursa City, Mr. J., High School Principal
• Mr. J. reflected on how he defined success. Most educators and the public want to see the numbers, and since the new superintendent arrived and this program was put into effect, there has been more than a ten-point increase in graduation rates. They hit a 94% graduation rate last year.
• For the principal, success is more personal. Far fewer are suspended and far fewer become non-completers or dropouts because they are removed from school. Incidents of disciplinary action have decreased. Behavior is managed at the student level as it happens, and punishment is not the only option.
• Mindfulness is explored every day. The deans meet with the students and explore why and how. They explore what they should have chosen instead. Mindfulness and restorative practices like reflections and apology letters are crucial. He doesn’t offer a token system or PBIS, but they have considered it. What they are doing now, Mr. J. feels is very successful.
• Mr. J. The principal did say that they lose a few each year, but they actively go after those with repeated disciplinary issues to try and reach them. He called it “Stabilize
relationships building.” He noted, however, that a 94% graduation rate is not 100%. They do lose a few to 3214 who then drop out.

- Another key factor for the principal is disciplinary incident reduction: he told the Middle School to stop sending files on their worst kids. He sends the deans and the Assistant Principal for 9th grade to the Middle School to meet their tough kids. He believes in “come meet the kid.”

Pine Ridge, Ms. C. Guidance Counselor

- Ms. C. feels the program is successful because she sees the kids not getting into so much trouble and improving in their academics. They have a grade point challenge. Much of the work can be done online, and when the kids do the classwork on their own, she knows they’re succeeding.
- The core teachers check in with her, and when the kids complete the requirements for a course, she bakes for them. She finds that a bigger hook than a certificate. The token economy works, but the principal buys pizzas for attendance. That is a huge hit with the students.
- They post an honor roll for the grade point challenge, and the pride builds. When asked specifically about mindfulness and PBIS, the counselor responded that this is a tough group to use mindfulness alone.
- Her lunch group is a subset of the neediest kids, and they respond well to the group. They talk about “what is in the realm of your control.” She doesn’t find strategies work well with this inner group; day to day needs are managed with individualized intervention.
- Ms. C. pushes into the classrooms and touches base with kids in their places, which helps teachers to see how she interacts. This develops a culture of caring. She pushes for a 100% graduation rate, but 2-5% of students in the program are so negatively impacted by outside forces that affect them.
- Finding success here, measured by decrease of discipline and increase of academic success, stems from the kids seeing the level of care from their teachers.
- Disciplinary action does happen, mostly when something in the kids’ lives comes to school. She calls it the “backpack of crap.” The counselor uses a suitcase for a metaphor. She packs things into a suitcase, and then she goes through it with the kids, asking them to invent stories behind the items. Her point is that “we all carry a suitcase, “so she tries to build understanding.
Chestnut Hill, Ms. G., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor

- Ms. G. explored her thoughts on success. She describes success as social emotional growth. She described that learning coping skills leads to improved attendance and improved attendance leads to academic success.
- Ms. G. stated that success is hard to quantify: those who learn to compensate for their issues often find an improvement in attendance and academic performance, but for her learning the social emotional skills were more important.
- Ms. G. felt that faculty and staff buy-in was crucial to success: everyone in the program makes the effort to build relationships, to connect to the individual by focusing on his or her needs.
  - Home visits and contact with families were good for building parent buy-in, which seemed to make the connections with the students easier to build.
  - Mindfulness, the counselor reports, is a big part of her practice. She and the social worker actively teach mindfulness, specifically distress tolerance and coping skills, building in ways that are individually tailored for them.
- The counselor reports that the PBIS reward system the principal developed works. She described the ticket system, where tickets are rewarded for attendance, kindness, and following the rules.
- Ms. G. was impressed to see the ticket system work with the older students. She had learned how to use it with elementary kids, but the system was working well at the alternative program.
- Students at the alternative program found success. She was not aware of the exact number but the program definitely improved graduation rates.
- Ms. G. knew that graduation rates were definitely improved because she could recall maybe 15 or fewer who washed out of the program, mainly for non-attendance.
- Ms. G. explained that those who stay in the program see a marked improvement in behavior issues. There are sharply fewer disciplinary incidents here than in the main high school.
- She feels the rate of recidivism is low in part because of the constant check-in with them. Ms. G. reports that many check-in on their own; they come to see her just to touch base.
- One feature that touches the hearts of the staff: older kids take younger ones under their wing when they arrive at the program. The maturity growth for the older kids when this happens is noticeable.

Ursa City, Ms. K., High School Guidance Counselor

- Ms. K. reported that a successful program has a strong restorative piece. “It is vital, especially for the repeat offenders. Restorative conferences, especially student-to-student, are often intense, requiring additional staff to support and control the environment.”
Restorative circles are an important element to an effective program. Often focusing on behavior issues that are deep, circles require building trust, building relations so there is a place where the students feel safe. They have a feeling of comradery, where they’re not alone.

The counselor offered that restorative circles were important and should be frequent with freshmen. They help to build connections and put to bed lingering middle school issues. She stated this makes the transition to high school much easier.

The counselor continued that often, other adults need to join the circle. The whole staff, everyone in the building is trained in the language of restorative practices. It helps everyone to connect.

Pine Ridge, Ms. D., Alt Ed Teacher

Ms. D. considers herself to be successful with her students (“especially those at the program, when I am able to make a personal connection with them. When they know that I care, that I am not just there to do the Spanish curriculum.”)

Many of them are guarded and it takes a bit of time to get to know them.

Something that I have begun this year, which has proven very effective, not just with our Alt Ed program but also with the evening program, is playing Uno in Spanish. As we play, we need to say the color and number (or command) of the card in Spanish. She lets them look up answers.

Ms. D. reports that what she does “may not be considered traditional Mindfulness, but we accomplish the goal. Students are in the present moment. We are connected in a single goal. Eye contact… We are laughing. They are vulnerable, since they are required to speak Spanish.

For me, making connections has been as easy as asking what the weather was supposed to be like for that afternoon.

Ms. D. gave an anecdote: “a student this semester, who failed last semester is now a volunteer in a local fire dept. I had them write a 5-line poem in Spanish about something or someone they really liked. When he could not think of a topic, I suggested the fire department. He wrote an awesome poem.

Ms. D. expanded on the anecdote. Community members shared with her about his work with the fire department. “When I told him what they said - the biggest smile came over his face. Our goal is to care for them.”

Ms. D. listed Key Factors:

- Care of Teachers/ buy-in is incredibly important.
- Mindfulness? Yes, but it depends on the group of kids Sometimes they have asked for more mindfulness exercises, but it works best put in a bit here and there.
- PBIS: I am/have been a member of our PBIS committee since it began, and it is crucial.
- Teachers must carefully pick the battles. This does not work in a mode where every rule needs to be enforced for the whole class. The most important job is to keep the lesson going and to let the students know their worth. They are important to me, but I will not permit them to interfere with the learning of others.
The program saves a lot of students from leaving school, but Ms. D. didn’t know the actual number.

Ms. D. was not aware of the actual number of who washes out each year, but she believed it was small.

Ms. D. felt confident there has been a reduction in student disciplinary behavior through these techniques. “Sometimes their go-to adrenaline-release mode is on high. I just need to remind them of our past interactions, and they are able to “come back.”

Chestnut Hill, Mr. H., Alt Ed Teacher

Mr. H. described what he saw as the formula for success: “Success is built on strategies. They all collaborate within their learning community, but the larger community gets involved. There is morning CrossFit, and the local police get involved in afternoon basketball.”

Mr. H. believes “Success is measured in changes in the person and the behavior. He described the PBIS system they use: “It is almost elementary level, but tickets and rewards work. The kids produce the work and they get the credits. Then, they have rewards like lunch with the principal, pizza or ice cream.”

Mr. H. described the problem with perception:
- If kids don’t complete 22 credits in 4-5 years, they’re considered failures, even if their behavior has changed for the better.
- The teachers collaborate in morning meetings which often center on individual persons. He likes these better than afternoon meetings which frequently are about “what happened?”
- Mindfulness is a powerful tool. Most of the teachers have the kids do reflective pieces. There is constant conversation about plans for the future. “Kids lack goals and planning, and that needs to be accomplished deliberately.”

Ursa City, Mr. L., High School Teacher

Mr. L. reflected on their success at Ursa City High: “Yes. “It’s messy, but it works. There are pockets of resistance but most people are on board.” He elaborated:

Mr. L. believes he was chosen to work in the building because of his life experiences. He did a lot with Outward Bound, which is an outdoor program with disadvantaged kids. They teach expeditionary learning, which takes kids out of what they know, and they have to learn to survive camping/hiking, or climbing/canoeing. This provides many different pathways to reach students that other teachers weren’t trained to know. His work in New York City and LA definitely helps him to reach tough kids. He reports all teachers in NYC receive advisory building training and culture training.
- Mr. L. reports that he spends a week in September building relationships with them and getting to know them as people. He carries that through his lessons, and he never has disciplinary trouble, even when he worked in LA and had students living in gangs.
Mindfulness and restorative practices H. believes “do work, but you also if you reach them as people first, you won’t have an issue. “I’ve never had a disciplinary issue here.”

Restorative practices help. A willingness on everyone's part to show patience… We need a constant reminder that kids grow and evolve.

Mr. L. didn’t know about the graduation rates or how many kids don’t complete. He repeated this was his second year.

Interview Question 6
What hurdles, impediments, or opposition was in the way?

Pine Ridge, Mr. B., Alt Ed Principal

For Mr. B., money was and remains the biggest issue. When budgets get tight, central administration looks to see where there is fat. The graduation rates and discipline decline are good protections, but every penny is counted.

Community buy-in was very difficult at first. Mr. A. started the program in a trailer next to the middle school, but now we have a wing of the high school. Community support took time, but the work-based learning projects really helped to win the hearts and minds of the community.

Faculty and student buy-in were difficult as well. Those in the program developed awful reputations in high school. They were simply seen as bad kids. On occasion when they do go back upstairs, they’re often not welcome. These kids burn bridges and have bad reputations.

We developed a written profile for the typical student in the program and shared it with administration and counselors. This helps with recruitment. The profile has not been shared with the teachers because they don’t want to increase a teacher’s push to remove problematic youth to the alternative program prematurely.

The Pine Ridge High School Board created a code of conduct for the alternative program that is very close to the code for the general high school. There are several reasons: minimum standards of behavior must be maintained; the perception can’t be that the alternative education program tolerates the intolerable.

Mr. B. says he has some flexibility, and he uses the 2:15 - 5:15 time slot that the 3214 kids attend as a 3 hour detention for the program kids. He tries not to just suspend, though sometimes it is inevitable. He also uses lunch detention with him and has found that to be effective because he can develop a relationship with the student over food.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. F, Alt Ed Principal

Mr. F. explained, the Chestnut Hill High School board and funding are the biggest impediments: The prevailing attitude was there is nothing wrong with the kids beyond
their behavior. He had been warned that funding would dry up. The Board didn’t like the low teacher/student ratios and the number of support staff.

- Mr. F. credits the Assistant Superintendent E. for the vision. The hardest sell initially is to develop a growth mindset: a fixed mindset takes a lot of inertia to overcome. Numbers, percentages, and ratios were the focus, but the success has turned the Board around.

- Mr. F. has not felt a lot of resistance in the community. Today, 50% of his population is native Spanish speakers who are grounded in the program because the parents see their kids coming to school and getting passing grades.

- Mr. F. hates the stigma of “those kids.” He notes there is still old thinking in the district of the Railroad Jail model and the hard cases. He doesn’t like the pity of “those guys are needier.” Mr. F. explains that the program has evolved, and the kids here are softer than the Railroad School.

- Institutional resistance: Mr. F. doesn’t deal with people from the main campus often. He credits Dr. E. who founded the program with filtering that from him. “The money is not an issue with him at the helm.” But Mr. F. knows that there are people from the main campus who try to push students into the program just to get them out because they don’t want to deal with them.

- “There was not much of a model to follow or guidance from State Ed.” Mr. F. feels that they were pioneers and made their own model.

**Ursa City, Mr. J., High School Principal**

- Mr. J. feels the whole program was a success story.
- “Having kids face their behavior, reflect on it, and do something about it was so much better than just tossing them out of the building.”
- Mr. J. noted that the disciplinary issues drop as they get older, as they do in most schools, but to take this school from graduation rates in the low 80’s to mid-90’s in 7 years is a success story.

**Pine Ridge, Ms. C. Alt Ed Guidance Counselor**

- Ms. C. feels the main hurdle from her perspective is institutional resistance against the students. Their reputations are not good.
- When she attends counseling meetings or interacts with staff outside of the program, she feels people are grateful for the existence of the program because they don’t have to deal with this population.
- On occasion, a student goes back to the day program, but “they frequently return because they resort to their old tricks.”
- The prevailing attitude in the general program is the alt program is where the bad kids go. This old perception hurts the reputation of the kids within the community, but the
community and teachers are happy to promote the program so they don’t have to deal with this population.

- Ms. C. finds the parents in the program are happy that the kids are going to school, are passing, or are at least on the right path.
- Ms. C. stated that she didn’t know much about the funding or the model used to create the program. She commented that the board policy was in place to provide for the program because they get results and help kids graduate.

**Chestnut Hill, Ms. G., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor**

- Ms. G. sees a lack of buy-in, which can lead to funding issues, as the primary hurdle to the alternative program. She believes that schools try to deal with issues in-house and they fail to see how individual needs are not met, nor do some in the community and many faculty at the main school see how the needs are met here at the alternative program.
- Ms. G. listed other barriers besides funding:
  - Coordination: developing an alternative program and finding means of providing all the different subject areas with limited staff is a challenge. CTEC helps to get them the credits they need, particularly since English and math can be taken at CTEC.
  - Staffing: finding good teachers willing to work in the alternative setting is a challenge. They have a great staff now, but she heard about a lot of turnover before the current principal came on staff.
  - Flexibility: all faculty and staff have to learn to deal with the students differently than they might at the main campus. They’re here for a reason.
  - Training. She elaborated: There are no graduate programs for teachers or counselors that focus on the needs of alternative programs such as this one. They have so many needs, and many of them have had real trauma in their lives. They require individualized therapy just as much as they do individualized instruction. There is a lot of on-the-job training here of very specialized skills.
  - Lack of diversity: Dysfunctional homes have many of the same needs, and hers are often 18 or 19 on their own working to help the families pay rent, or they have babies of their own already.
  - Ms. G. noted that she doesn’t feel community resistance within this population. Her parents are so grateful that they have a nurturing place to go, particularly the parents of the at-risk youth with school phobia.
Ursa City, Ms. K, High School Guidance Counselor

- Ms. K explored impediments to fully implementing the program. The main issue at this school is that not everyone is on board, or has buy-in. There is resistance.
- Some teachers feel the students returning to the classroom without consequence leaves them unsupported, which builds resentment.
- Not everyone has been trained, and this is an impediment because it hampers buy-in.
- Ms. K. feels that to maintain consistency, staff training would foster buy-in, but now there is resistance.
- Consistency is important in the counselor’s mind. The counselor believes consistency and follow-through, with patience and nurturing the child, all can blend with training.
- Ms. K. feels that restorative action should not replace discipline; she feels they should dovetail, as she said before. The focus on restorative may feed some of the resistance in the program.
- Behaviors don’t change overnight, and, at times, the teachers see them returning to the classroom without perceived consequences.
- People need to remember that change is hard and takes time. Ms. K. suggested that a better sense of team would help foster this, and training would foster both.

Pine Ridge, Ms. D., Alt Ed Teacher

- Ms. D. described what she saw as the main impediment, resistance:
  - At the beginning of the semester, I need to remind them that I am only there to help them get their foreign language credit for graduation.
  - Many of them have had very negative experiences in the regular foreign language class for a variety of reasons, but once she has their trust, she has them.
  - Community Resistance: Some teachers have made comments about programs not requiring equal work. “I have told them to come downstairs and see what is getting done.”
  - Ms. D. offered her thoughts on Institutional Resistance: (teachers/ administration believe in spending time and money on the good kids. She pointed out that “research shows educators and people in society believe bad kids have earned their punishment.”
  - We need a culture change: the “be good or be gone” vs. restorative justice mindset? The first needs to be gone.
  - Funding. The district is good about the budget, but money is always a concern.
- Ms. D. declined to explore other impediments like SED policy.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. H., Alt Ed Teacher

- For Mr. H., “The most immediate problem is having 20-year-old kids next to 14-year-olds in the hallways. They make friends and things overlap.” L. believes this negative peer pressure is a significant impediment. “I hear of formers, 25-year-old kids who are
still stuck in life, and it is heartbreaking. They had bad influences in their lives, and it is tough to break patterns of no/low expectations within some elements of the community.”

- Mr. H. counted off on his fingers:
  - Staff buy-in is always difficult. Some want to use the program as a place to dump the kids they don’t want in the day program, while others are jealous of the funding.
  - Community buy-in is hard, too. For the parents who are involved in the program, they love it, but other parents see it as a financial drain.
  - Funding: the teacher has seen tough times and flourishing times. Currently, under the assistant superintendent and principal, they have what they need. He recalls, however, times when they didn’t and kids were just left to drop out.

- Mr. H. was expansive in his belief of the biggest barrier: “We try to make the program everything to everyone.

- The diversity of problems drives us to divide our attention and resources: attendance, suspensions, pregnancies, and poverty -- these all can’t be solved in one place.

- We currently have high intelligence kids mixed with social-emotional or school phobia kids in the same room -- with kids on the lower end of the spectrum. We save a lot, but some just get lost in the swarm.”

**Ursa City, Mr. L., High School Teacher**

- Mr. L. teacher described hurdles:
  - Not all teachers are on board. Some who have been here a long time are frustrated. They’re not buying-in as quickly as the new teachers. He went on to say again that it was messy.
  - If a teacher doesn’t understand the why of how a kid behaves, it creates a bad environment. They see a kid misbehaving, don’t know how to handle it, and think the administration is sticking them with a problem child.
  - He has observed that race is an issue. Black and brown kids, Mr. L. reports, feel disenfranchised. All kids in these programs lose faith or purpose, and he wants to see them pulled out of the pipeline, but “it seems easier for certain kids.”
  - Tough kids are hard to handle, and some definitely fall to the side. Though the program is working, he occasionally notices a student who is suddenly no longer there. He knows that student went to a 3214 hearing.
  - Mr. L. doesn’t have classroom issues, but kids just have life issues: poverty, involvement with probation or the courts, transiency, substance abuse.
  - Mr. L. finds the community generally supportive. “With the colleges nearby, it is an academic community that backs the superintendent, but there are pockets or ringers who stir the pot at meetings and create dissent.
Mr. L. reflected that the district “seems to be willing to have those controversies. They’ve stuck to the plan for 7 years, but it is a struggle.”

Furthering his thoughts on race, Mr. L. described that he heard the local newspapers focused on the superintendent’s race when he was hired. Last year there was racial unrest over the school play, Hairspray, but they worked through it. Mr. L. emphasized that he did not think the school was racist, but he felt that certain groups had an easier time working through the mediations.

Interview Question 7
Describe a story of success; another of failure.

Pine Ridge, Mr. B., Alt Ed Principal

- Mr. B. shared a success story: there was a boy he met last summer who joined the program. The boy was socially awkward and resistant to the program. He observed the father put him down, right in-front of the principal. He had a poor attitude toward school, but the principal coaxed him to come, and he joined the Friday work-based-learning opportunities in a flower shop in town.
- The student and the owner made a connection, and his confidence is flying now. That student is learning a business, and he has caught up with all of his credits at the high school. Mr. B. sees this as proof the program works.
- Mr. B. described a failure: he had a boy who was doing well but fell in with a girl who was not good for him.
- In 2017, he was successful, but by the end of the year, he was into drugs with the girl. He started fighting with his mother at home. There were multiple police-involved incidents and domestic violence toward his mother.
- The uncle tried to intervene, without success, and Dad left years ago. Ironically, the girl pulled it together enough and graduated from the Alt program in January, but he never came back. Mom tried to re-enroll him in the program, but he never returned. The drugs had taken their toll.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. F., Alt Ed Principal

- Mr. F. described a success story: he repeated about those who come back to visit. While the researcher was there, 3 students came back. They’re attending community college and just wanted to say hello and thank the principal again, and the researcher was able to see what Mr. F described. The feelings were genuine.
- Mr. F. related a failure story.
- “It happens more than I would like. Some drop for non-attendance, and this issue bothers him because it is indicative of other symptoms.”
• Mr. F. provided an anecdote: “boy recovered credit for 3 years, and then dropped in the 4th year. His mother was abusive and violent.”
• Mr. F. reported that the boy was never a disciplinary problem, but the mother was arrested for domestic violence. The father took him in, but he lived out of the district. The McKinney Vento law kept the boy coming to the program, but they lived in an awful motel. The room was moldy, and he eventually just dropped out to go to work to help his father pay bills.

Ursa City, Mr. J., HS Principal
• Mr. J. felt the whole program was a success story. Having kids face their behavior, reflect on it, and do something about it was so much better than just tossing them out of the building.
• Mr. J. noted that the disciplinary issues drop as they get older, as they do in most schools, but to take this school from graduation rates in the low 80’s to mid-90’s in 7 years is a success story.
• Mr. J. commented that some still face 3214 proceedings, and though there is home instruction for them, most do not return. It is usually for a serious offense, like a drug charge, for example.
• 3214 will land a student in suspension, but shorter than in the past. We require restorative efforts, like community service, to shorten the suspension with tutoring.
• The goal is to get the student back into the building where he and the deans can work with them individually. Despite that, Mr. J. noted, there are a couple a year they lose, but it is far fewer than in the past.

Pine Ridge, Ms. C. Alt Ed Guidance Counselor
• Ms. C. shared a success story: “Sam” was a senior who needed 10.5 credits (out of 22). He had no support from home, and his self-image was very low. He had language barriers, but he found a connection with the teachers and her. He felt that he belonged, and by the end he won an award at the Orange County Youth Bureau breakfast and went on to a State college.
• Mrs. K. didn’t share a specific failure story but rather commented on how disheartened she becomes with every dropout. She stated there were only 2 or 3 a year, usually kids who make poor life choices and get involved with drugs, but those are the ones who often leave and never come back.
Chestnut Hill, Ms. G., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor

- Ms. G. described a story of success: her first month in the job, and a female student attacked a male student, slapping him, and the administration sent her to the counselor. The girl was very resistant: “I don’t know her; I don’t like her!”
- Now, this student is her most regular visitor. She is her “most attached student.” They speak about that initial mistrust, and she described how she built rapport by fostering trust with the girl. (Note: counselor has been at the program for about a year.)
- As for failure, Ms. G. reported that many of her students are on probation, and she is required to share information with the probation office, often ordered to do so by the courts.
- Ms. G. reported on a student to the probation officer, and the student then came to school angry. He tried to fight the principal, and he wanted to “pop” the counselor. The student was assigned a long-term suspension through the 3214 process, but she believes he is still trying to recover credit in the 3pm -- 5pm program.
- Ms. G. has a few out on long-term suspension, perhaps 6 or 7. Some recover some credits in the 3pm -- 5pm program. A few qualify for home instruction, mainly because of their compulsory age, but most who don’t return don’t complete high school.
- Ms. G. noted that the long-term suspension kids are almost always for violence or threats of violence. After they serve their term, if they have kept up with their credit, some do return to the alternative program, but that is infrequent.
- Ms. G. didn’t believe there was a strong presence of drugs in the alternative program, but she did feel that drugs were a key factor in those who exhibited violence, who then faced removal.

Ursa City, Ms. K, High School Guidance Counselor

- Ms. K described restorative counseling sessions where they took understanding away from the session and did not require repetition. She reflected on the positive involvement of the community:
  - BOCES offers traditional alternative placement for students exhibiting persistent recidivism.
  - The Lighthouse program: Kids with crisis, mental health issues, and sudden housing concerns can go as a temporary measure. The tutors there work with our teachers for continuity of the program. They are particularly good with those with school avoidance issues and anxiety. Group counseling, individual counseling, and skill development programs there are very good.
  - The GAAC and the YMCA: Students can enjoy a combination of programs through on-line classes and can take some things at the YMCA. It is great for those who have trouble staying in class.
○ The YMCA offers *Plato*, a credit recovery program, so she and the counselors can blend programs at the school and through the community resources for students who struggle, particularly with attendance and school anxiety.

- For her story of failure, Ms. K. stated that she has had a few who have not found success in the various things offered at school. She reminded the researcher that she hasn’t been at the school long enough to have a really bad example, but she has had some drop out after long-term suspensions or others who could not overcome school avoidance/anxiety.

**Pine Ridge, Ms. D., Alt Ed Teacher**

- Ms. D. described success through restorative practice, an anecdote: “I have a student this semester, who did very little work and failed last semester. He is now a volunteer in a local fire dept. and has been threatened with probation. I began to ask him about the fire dept. “Did he have any fire calls that weekend?” Then, in February, I had them write a 5-line poem in Spanish about something or someone they really liked. When he could not think of a topic, I suggested the fire department. He wrote an awesome poem.”
- Ms. D. described failure: “Why do I think our effort failed in a particular case?” Ms. D. asked the researcher to “See number 5 above.” She knew that those who faced long-term suspensions for serious offenses didn’t get offered the program.
- “They go to credit recovery or home instruction. I don’t recall an example of a student who entered our program who was subsequently removed.”

**Chestnut Hill, Mr. H., Alt Ed Teacher**

- Mr. H. generalized about success by sharing that many of his students have gone on to graduate and head off to college, but repeated that changes in behavior are more common and more important than graduation numbers.
- Mr. H. reflected on failures: “In the past, when it was credit recovery, the freshmen were in another program where therapeutic emphasis was more appropriate and staff were better trained.”
- L. recalled those over the years who drop out of school, run into problems with law enforcement, and “fail.”
- Mr. H. felt run-ins with law enforcement were clear markers of failure. Mr. H. asked to give an anecdote: “a girl who missed school yesterday, came in this morning and had a meltdown. We lost his entire math block as a result. She is a troubled youngster, and her social and emotional bags disrupted our entire program for an hour this morning.” Mr. H. spoke from experience that this type of student most closely fit the ones that he “loses.”
Ursa City, Mr. L., High School Teacher

- Mr. L. described a story of success: “a student who was particularly difficult was assigned a case manager. A panel came together to make a plan for him to help him. They didn’t just kick him out of school. He was placed deliberately with certain teachers, and Mr. L. was chosen. There has been some success, but the boy is still struggling.”

- Mr. L. went on to describe things in the district that were positive/successful:
  - Social Justice Week organized by the kids in clubs
  - Beauty in Color themed competition, art and posters, activities
  - SWISS (Strong Women in Society)
  - Guest speakers and Panel Presentations on social topics: an inmate speaking on prison reform, poets, hip hop artists… He feels the school gives attention to the different voices in the community.
  - Some of these are optional, but a number of the kids choose to go.
  - Community involvement is very strong
  - Lighthouse program is a non-profit community group that comes in and teaches about homelessness, mental health. If a student or family is in crisis, they offer 28-day programs. They’re short-term live-in programs with tutors who work with teachers and counselors from the school.
  - Greater Area Activity Center YMCA runs tutoring support and helps kids with credit recovery. They work with the school to provide outreach.

- Mr. L. didn’t have a personal story of failure, but he wonders from time to time when one of his most difficult ones leaves on long-term suspension. “Will he make it? Sometimes, they don’t come back…” and he wonders what became of them.

Interview Question 8
Place in order of importance the qualities for program success: contact with families, teacher buy-in, individual goal setting, training of staff in techniques, group/restorative circles, therapy, other.

Pine Ridge, Mr. B., Alt Ed. Principal

a. Teacher buy-in
b. Contact with the families
c. Individual goal setting
d. Training of staff: mindfulness, Interruption of Action, Hawthorne’s book
e. Groups and restorative justice -- not a lot of restorative action in this program, but the guidance counselor does excellent work in her lunch groups
Chestnut Hill, Mr. F, Alt Ed Principal

a. Teacher buy-in  
b. Individual goal setting  
c. Training: repeated the importance of *Power of Peace*  
d. Contact with families  
e. Groups, restorative circles, therapy  
f. The principal commented on letter c: “there is not a lot of training in house, but I send them out to learn Interrupted Action. He sends people to trauma training workshops. The principal further extended his thoughts on letter e: “these are incorporated into the fabric of the lessons every day. If necessary, everything stops and problems are addressed before life goes back on full.”

Ursa City Schools, Mr. J., HS Principal

a. Individual Goal Setting -- reaching individual kids  
b. Restorative action, social justice, mindfulness  
c. Teacher/faculty buy-in, including deans, counselors, etc.  
d. Training in social-emotional practices  
e. Contact with families

Pine Ridge, Ms. C. Alt Ed Guidance Counselor

a. Teacher buy-in  
b. Teacher buy-in (it's that important)  
c. Individual goal setting  
d. Training for staff, but if you choose the right staff, they’re pros  
e. Groups/restorative circles  
f. Other: She suggested as part of teacher buy-in, put the students first. If the student has buy-in, if the student feels someone cares, then it will take off.

Chestnut Hill, Ms. G., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor

a. Individual goal setting  
b. Teacher buy-in, teacher caring  
c. Contact with families  
d. Groups, restorative circles, therapy/mindfulness  
e. Training of adults  
f. Mentorship between students and staff
Ursa City, Ms. K., High School Guidance Counselor

a. Training
b. Buy-in
c. Groups and restorative practices
d. Individual goal setting
e. Contact with families (probably should be higher)
f. All of the above

Pine Ridge, Ms. D., Alt Ed Teacher

a. Teacher buy-in
b. Training of Interruption of Action: mindfulness and PBIS
c. Individual goal setting - “make students care”
d. Contact with Families
e. Groups and other methods are difficult - “I only see them one period a day.”

Chestnut Hill, Mr. H., Alt Ed Teacher

a. Teacher buy-in
b. Training of teachers and staff
c. Individual goal setting
d. Contact with families, “If they have families.”
e. Groups

Ursa City, Mr. L., High School Teacher

a. Teacher buy-in
b. Training
c. Individual goal setting
d. Social Emotional Groups, Restorative Practice
e. Contact with Families

Interview Question 9
Describe how you handle repeat offenders in the program.

Pine Ridge, Mr. B., Alt Ed Principal

- Mr. B. reported that repeat offenders are managed by the code of conduct and the things described in the impediments section: he tries to be flexible, and the 3 hour detention and lunch detention work to a point, but if the student is recalcitrant, suspension and removal are on the table. Thankfully, he only averages 2-3 a year.
Chestnut Hill, Mr. F., Alt Ed. Principal
- Repeat offenders, Mr. F. advised the researcher to refer to his answer about flexing the code of conduct, and then 3214 as the last resort.

Ursa City, Mr. J., HS Principal
- Mr. J. was confident: repeat offenders will ultimately drop or face a 3214, but it is rare. They respond well to the program.

Pine Ridge, Ms. C. Alt Ed Guidance Counselor
- Ms. C. reflected on repeat offenders, “If the offense is enough, the student will wind up in the credit recovery only program 2:15-5 p.m., but, occasionally, a student returns to the mainstream program. It takes maturity, but when a student keeps repeating the offenses, it usually is an outside force like home life or drug use that disrupts their progress.”

Chestnut Hill, Ms. G., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor
- Ms. G. directed the researcher to review number 8, meaning goal setting, restorative circles, training...

Ursa City, Ms. K., High School Guidance Counselor
- Ms. K reported that “repeat offenders work their way through the restorative sessions, but it doesn’t take long for them to make it to administration. If severe enough, they face 3214, but that is rare.”

Pine Ridge, Ms. D., Alt Ed Teacher
- Ms. D. didn’t recall any lasting disciplinary issues. “I pick my battles, and … it is hard for a kid to be insubordinate after you just kicked his butt in Uno.” Ms. D. emphasized the “importance of relationship building in cultivating that relationship so there instances of serious discipline are not likely to arise.”

Chestnut Hill, Mr. H., Alt Ed Teacher
- When asked about repeat offenders, Mr. H. gave the anecdote: “mom, aunt, and child living in one room. I have watched this model with so many family issues over the years. They bear under the weight of generational issues, and they send their problems to us: same families, new kids repeating the same problems.”
• The researcher redirected and asked him about repeat offenders, he said the program is so important. “In 25 years, I have easily had 200 kids who would have just dropped out while this program gave them “a real shot. They repeat the behavior, and we stick to our practices and work with them. They would have washed out in a traditional program and would have joined ‘the system.’”

**Ursa City, Mr. L., High School Teacher**

• Mr. L. reported that “Repeat offenders continue to get services here unless it is really bad and they are sent out of the building.”

**Interview Question 10**

**Describe how you would grade/rate the program’s effectiveness.**

**Pine Ridge, Mr. B., Alt Ed Principal**

• Mr. B. gave his program a grade of 85-90%

**Chestnut Hill, Mr. F., Alt Ed. Principal**

• Mr. F gave the program a 7, for this year. Past years 8-9. Mr. F.’s reference was to the 20 seniors who arrived in March, and the district’s expectation was that he would help them graduate 3 months later.

**Ursa City, Mr. J., High School Principal**

• The program is an experiment, but it is very effective. 94%

**Pine Ridge, Ms. C. Alt Ed Guidance Counselor**

• Ms. C. believed the program was performing between 80-90%, “based upon the students who were retained in the program and didn’t drop out.”

**Chestnut Hill, Ms. G., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor**

• Ms. G. rated the program’s effectiveness as very high. She noted that of 130 kids, 6 on suspension and 10-12 dropping out, leaves a high success rate for those who stay in the program and get the interventions.
• “For those who learn the coping skills and practice them, it makes all the difference.”
Ursa City, Ms. K, High School Guidance Counselor
- Ms. K was brief in her answer: “program is working, but it could be better with more teacher buy-in.”

Pine Ridge, Ms. D., Alt Ed Teacher
- Ms. D. felt the program was highly effective, referring the researcher once again to her answer to number 5, where she gave her anecdote of the fireman.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. H., Alt Ed Teacher
- Mr. H. smiled, “We’re a 10. So many of our kids turn their lives around.”

Ursa City, Mr. L., High School Teacher
- Mr. L. stated that “This program is really effective.” He repeated that he came from urban schools in NYC and LA where success was “rare.”

Interview Question 11
Describe what you do if things are working well; describe the process if things are not working.

Pine Ridge, Mr. B., Alt Ed. Principal
- If something is not working, Mr. B. replied, we fix it.
- The bi-weekly meetings with staff bring issues to light, and we make changes together. If it is working, we follow the same procedure. We meet to discuss why. We brainstorm ways to keep it going, even if that means to make no change.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. F., Alt Ed Principal
- If something is not working, Mr. F. reported, then it is addressed head-on. He and the staff meet daily to review issues.
- Mr. F. elaborated: the job is taxing, and his health has been a concern at times. He reflects constantly about what is working and what is not. “I am grateful for a particular teacher who serves as a sounding board for me. It is the participant teacher here in this study. He never says yes or no, but he gives pros and cons to my ideas.”
Ursa City Schools, Mr. J., High School Principal

- Mr. J. stated that “If there are issues, we meet as administration, deans, counselors and/or teachers to find the issues and discuss them. We adjust as we need to adjust, but the kids respond well to the program.
- “We follow the same process for when things are working; we must maintain what works and fix what doesn’t.”

Pine Ridge, Ms. C., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor

- Ms. C. stated that it is important to “keep it going. The teachers are wonderful. They don’t take prep periods. They don’t take lunch periods off. They are “all-in.” If someone is absent, they cover each other.”
- Ms. C. emphasized that they have meetings to review what is working and what isn’t working. They change as they need to change

Chestnut Hill, Ms. G., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor

- Ms. G. believes the program is working, in part because of the meetings they have frequently. The adults can decompress and feel connected. The adults brainstorm together and the Principal genuinely listens to concerns.
- Ms. G. added to her thoughts on how well the program works: she and the social worker do a lot of parent outreach. They check in and give them a voice in the school. They seek the back stories to their impediments, which aids the teachers and administration. Do families need food? Is there a family crisis?
- Ms. G. further noted: The families are not traditionally well equipped to manage the school system, and a lot of previously undiscovered learning disabilities are uncovered, which she connected to her answer for #13.
- Ms. G. reflected, “Learning that so many of them in the program have undiscovered learning disabilities is heartbreaking because it is often too late. They are in their later teen years and have been bounced out of school for so long that they just fall through the cracks. This population is often transient, or at least moves a lot seeking affordable housing in a fairly wealthy community. They miss or avoid assessments for Special Ed testing. By not getting their services, they get into disciplinary trouble, develop school avoidance behaviors, and ultimately drop out of school.”

Ursa City, Ms. K., High School Guidance Counselor

- Ms. K was brief in her answer: “If something is working, keep working it.”
- Ms. K responded, “The training needs to be globally delivered, and the restorative pieces must not replace discipline.”
• Restorative should be part of a re-entry meeting, not a replacement of consequence. The counselor is confident that the program will grow, and she hopes to influence that process.”

Pine Ridge, Ms. D., Alt Ed Teacher
• Collaboration and open communication with administration and guidance.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. H., Alt Ed Teacher
• If it is working, we keep at it. The district-level buy-in created success for these kids. “My measure of success is that we have turned out productive members of society.”
• Yes, we have kids in jail, but we gave them a chance and the district was behind it. This is their last chance, their last stop. It is a struggle because we lack a true target population. We try to be the fixer for all types of kids.

Ursa City, Mr. L., High School, Teacher
• The principal has meetings, and he is one of the teachers who is often tapped to help with special cases. “I would like to find ways to capture more students.”

Interview Question 12
Describe what you would recommend to another principal, counselor, or teacher who is planning to implement an Alt Ed program.

Pine Ridge, Mr. B., Alt Ed. Principal
• Mr. B.’ Recommendations for starting a program:
  a. Staff -- the right staff members have to be chosen. They can’t be quick with disciplinary referrals, but they can’t be pushovers. They must believe in the program.
  b. Group cohesion: there must be a sense of team.
  c. The family has to be involved and supportive. Too often, they’re resistant. You have to convince them that this program is the last stop on the train before removal/non-completion. These are many of the same kids he saw all the time as an AP in middle-school, but at that time the parents weren’t yet defeated. By the time the kids are 15 or 16, often the parents have given up hope. Catch the parents, and often you’ll catch the kids.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. F., Alt Ed Principal
• Mr. F.s’ recommendations for starting a program:
  a. Contact people living and doing the work. He has had others come to visit his program.
  b. He has visited programs: he has been around Westchester to see programs.
c. Putnam Northern Westchester BOCES shares information and keeps everyone in Alt Ed programs in touch with each other. Support from other programs is vital to survival.
d. He named several people running other programs in the Hudson Valley.

Ursa City Schools, Mr. J., High School Principal

- Mr. J.’s Recommendations for starting a program:
  a. The principal encouraged people to explore social emotional training, consider restorative methods, mindfulness, and perhaps to read the superintendent’s book.
  b. There is a lot of literature out there about developing a program that doesn’t include developing a culture of exclusion.

Pine Ridge, Ms. C. Alt Ed Guidance Counselor

- Ms. C. advised, “It is a therapeutic program. The staff has to have a complete understanding of the type of student: it is not Special Ed, and it is not discipline-cases only. It can’t become a dumping ground for a school.
- The kids who succeed the most are the lost ones that we’ve found.” She emphasized that: “It is not about the graduation rate. It is about saving a kid. One at a time, individualized plans are the key. Building relationships.”

Chestnut Hill, Ms. G., Alt Ed Guidance Counselor

- Ms. G. gave detailed recommendations for developing a program:
  a. Develop a protocol for the type of students referred. They make it work, but they need so much individualized attention, and sometimes a student is sent who just causes havoc, particularly those prone to violence.
  b. Have individual expectations and develop individual plans for the kids.
  c. Have plenty of professional development for the faculty and staff because the skills needed for success in alt ed are not expressly taught in college, particularly
     i. School Phobia
     ii. Trauma
     iii. Anxiety
     iv. Family Crisis Management
d. The counselor noted that she has heard of teachers who burn out and leave the program only to want to return because of the sense of team or family among the faculty here in the alternative program. She notes perhaps the difficulty of teaching them draws the adults closer than in the main program.
Ursa City, Ms. K, High School Guidance Counselor

- Ms. K suggested further research into other more established programs. She named a program The Promise Zone in Central New York that led her to her last school where restorative practices were more developed than at Ursa City, but she was optimistic about the progress she has observed in Ursa City. “Taking the best from other programs will help in developing a new one, but training and buy-in are vital.”

Pine Ridge, Ms. D., Alt Ed Teacher

- Visit programs and talk with people who work in the programs to see what they have tried and what works.

Chestnut Hill, Mr. H., Alt Ed Teacher

- The teacher recommends finding ways to target the services. Make it condensed and focus on what they need. Freshmen may need a more therapeutic setting, where older kids need a chance to earn back credits. “You have to target the individual.” The goal should be: “you’ve earned your way back. There should be no permanent punishment.”

Ursa City, Mr. L., High School, Teacher

- People need to be trained beyond what they get in teacher education. Outward bound, social emotional training, culture training, all helped him, as did his experiences in the urban schools. People have to buy into the program. If they resist, something fails, and people get resentful. Keys to success are training, buy-in, and a team mentality.