

ABSTRACT

David Ross Renfrow, AN ANALYSIS OF A PLAN TO IMPROVE THE GRADUATION RATES IN JOHNSTON COUNTY SCHOOLS. (Under the direction of Dr. William Rouse, Jr.) Department of Educational Leadership, November, 2015.

There have been limited qualitative case studies exploring effective strategies designed to improve graduation rates in rural school districts. Specifically, few studies have presented information based solely upon the voices of practitioners themselves in solving the graduation crisis in America's public schools. This study will add to the existing literature by presenting data generated from within a large, rural school district in eastern North Carolina. This qualitative study utilized the Critical Incident Case Study Model as the tool to produce data from surveys and interviews with principals, graduation coaches, and Student Services personnel in the Johnston County Schools concerning information pertinent to improving cohort graduation rates within the school district to 90%. Qualitative research designs that utilize case studies afford the researcher an in-depth study of an individual group, institution, organization or program. Specifically, this study will examine responses from interviews and surveys concerning stakeholder views on strategies to improve graduation rates to 90% within the district in the effort of merging those proven strategies into a Graduation Improvement Plan for the district.

The analysis of data will help in creating a Graduation Improvement Plan for the district with strategies aimed at aiding and assisting at risk students in elementary, middle, and high school.

AN ANALYSIS OF A PLAN TO IMPROVE GRADUATION RATES IN JOHNSTON
COUNTY SCHOOLS

A Dissertation

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The Faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership

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by

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COUNTY SCHOOLS

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DEDICATION

I dedicate this dissertation to my family and friends: To my wife and best friend who was always there for me; Amy, we miss you and cannot wait to be with you one day in that home, not made with hands, eternal in the heavens;

To our three beautiful children; Tricia, Jenna, and John Ross, thank you for understanding this process and having patience when I did not: and

To old friends, close friends, and new friends; without your collective efforts this task would still remain incomplete.

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CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

From the earliest days of the republic, education has been considered a primary function of the state (Jefferson-Jenkins & Hawkins-Hill, 2011). There is no mention of compulsory public education in the United States Constitution due to the fact that the majority of authors of the document reasoned education was best left to local communities and the states (Retrieved from www.Education.stateuniversity.com). During this formative stage in the government's history, many politicians were distrustful of a federal government obtaining too much power under the new constitution. Those advocates for states' rights did not want any branch of the federal government imposing what should and should not be taught in schools as an alternative to local communities and parents. Their belief in this was so strong; the Tenth Amendment was added to the Constitution, which effectively excludes all federal involvement in education. If federal involvement in education is unconstitutional, how have federal agencies become so dominant in recent educational practices?

In 1983, the federal government announced that public education throughout the country was in a state of decay and that the nation would suffer because other countries had surpassed the level of expectation that had become the accepted standard (U.S. Department of Education, 1983). *A Nation at Risk* was published and proved to be the platform for this major reform of education policy and practice. Higher standards were needed if students throughout the country were going to compete with other students throughout the world. Accountability was needed to ensure teachers were preparing students for success after their public education experience.

It appears the trend that began in 1983 regarding federal involvement in education has continued to increase with each passing decade. More recently, the federal government asserted

more control with the implementation of "Race to the Top" grants, the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind, and formulation of national standards for a common curriculum. With a bearish national economy, state and local governments have overlooked federal overtures into their area of responsibility in an attempt to secure federal dollars to support public education. While state and local agencies have attempted to balance local education budgets, they have also sought to boost their finances and save jobs and programming with an infusion of federal funds.

On March 1, 2010, President Barack Obama highlighted steps his administration would take to combat the high school dropout crisis and invest in strategies to ensure students graduate from high school prepared for college and careers (White House Press Release, 2010). President Obama challenged states to identify high schools with graduation rates below sixty percent and discussed the administration's investment to help these schools increase their graduation rates by committing 3.5 billion dollars to fund transformational changes in America's persistently low-performing schools (White House Press Release, 2010). Additionally, the President's 2011 fiscal year budget included 900 million dollars to support School Turnaround Grants, emphasizing the importance of investigating dropout prevention and recovery strategies to help make learning more engaging and relevant for students, in addition to 100 million dollars in a College Pathways program was initiated to promote a college readiness culture in high schools through programs that allow students to earn a high school diploma and college credit at the same time (White House Press Release, 2010). "This is a problem we can't afford to accept or ignore," President Obama said. "The stakes are too high-for our children, for our economy, for our country. It's time for all of us to come together-parents and students, principals and teachers, business leaders and elected officials-to end America's dropout crisis"(White House Press Release, 2010). The President's commitment to reducing the dropout rate and assisting all students to graduate from

high school as college and career ready is evidenced in his comments: "It's time for all of us, no matter our backgrounds, to come together and solve this epidemic. Stemming the tide of dropouts will require turning around our low-performing schools. For example, just two thousand high schools in cities like Detroit, Los Angeles, and Philadelphia produce over 50% of America's dropouts. Let us all make turning around our schools our collective responsibility as Americans"(White House Press Release, 2010).

The President indicated that it would take a national effort to help turn around America's persistently low-performing schools. "It takes more time, stronger interventions, and a larger investment of funds to help turn around persistently low-performing schools" (White House Press Release, 2010). Under the leadership of Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, the United States Department of Education's School Turnaround Grants will support vigorous interventions for five thousand of the nation's lowest-performing schools designed to drive change, improve student achievement, and transform school culture (White House Press Release, 2010). To access the school improvement funds, states and school districts will choose among four reform models to change their lowest-performing schools. Those four reform models are as follows:

1. Turnaround Model: Among other actions, the school district must replace the principal and at least half of the school staff, adopt a new governance structure for the school, and implement a new or revised instructional program.
2. Restart Model: The school district must close and reopen the school under the management of a charter school operator, a charter management organization or an educational management organization selected through a rigorous review process. A restart school would be required to admit within the grades it serves any former student who wishes to attend.

3. School Closure: The school district must close the failing school and enroll the students who attended the school in other, higher-achieving schools in the district.
4. Transformational Model: The school must address four areas of reform, including (1) developing teacher and school leader effectiveness (and replacing the principal who led the school prior to enforcement of the transformational model); (2) implementing comprehensive reform strategies; (3) extending learning and teacher planning time and creating community-oriented schools; and (4) providing operating flexibility and sustained support (White House Press Release, 2010).

An essential component in the President's platform to improve education in America is keeping high school students engaged and on track to graduate. For instance, one study found when students were asked reasons they dropped out of school, nearly half of the students responded that they did not find school interesting, and over two-thirds reported that school did not motivate or inspire them (Rumberger, 2004). Therefore, the Obama Administration is committed to investing in innovative dropout recovery and prevention strategies to better engage youth in their learning and help them catch up academically (White House Press Release, 2010). The President's plan supported effective dropout prevention strategies through 50 million dollars committed to the Graduation Promise Fund and through the following reforms supported under the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act:

1. Personalized and individualized instruction and support to keep students engaged in their learning and focused on success.
2. Multiple pathways and credit recovery programs, such as high-quality alternative high schools, transfer schools, or career and work-based experiences to help students

recover and maintain sufficient academic progress and to get back on track toward a high school diploma.

3. Better use of data and information to identify and respond to students at risk of failure, and assist with important transitions to high school and college (White House Press Release, 2010).

Lastly, the President's administration has sought to inspire and promote a culture of college readiness through participation in a challenging high school curriculum that has a greater impact on whether a student will earn a four-year college degree rather than basing it on test scores, class rank, or grades (White House Press Release, 2010). The President's 2011 fiscal year budget supported a new 100 million dollar College Pathways Program to increase access to college-level, dual credit, and other accelerated courses in high-need high schools and to support college-attending strategies and models that will help students succeed (White House Press Release, 2010). For example, early college high schools allow students to earn a high school diploma and an associate degree simultaneously, while dual enrollment programs provide college-level courses and opportunities for students to earn postsecondary credit while still in high schools (White House Press Release, 2010). The President's administration has also launched new efforts to better support completion and submission of the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) to increase the likelihood that students will enroll in college (White House Press Release, 2010).

Problem of Practice

Within the borders of the state, North Carolina is viewed as progressive and a national leader in attempts at education reform (Fiske & Ladd, 2014). Strong leadership in the governor's office as well as the General Assembly helped contribute to this climate of innovation and

improvement. Traditionally, the state has allowed much autonomy to local school districts in conducting their day-to-day operations.

Locally, initiatives created at the federal level to improve graduation rates serve as a model for state and district proposals. To take advantage of these programs which support increased graduation rates, private enterprise, in many instances, has collaborated with local education officials to tackle the issue of low graduation rates. For example, in several school districts located in central North Carolina, Triangle High Five initiated a partnership known as High Five in 2003 (Triangle High Five, 2014). The triangle include the geographical urban and suburban areas of Raleigh, Durham, and Chapel Hill. Orage Quarles III, president and publisher of The News and Observer, wondered what would happen if his company and several others joined forces to fund a major initiative to improve public schools (Triangle High Five, 2014). He asked superintendents of the Triangle's five public school systems the following questions: What would you do? How would you work together? Where would you focus your efforts? How would we measure success? (Triangle High Five, 2014) These questions led to a series of round-table discussions among the superintendents and leaders of Blue Cross and Blue Shield of North Carolina, Progress Energy, Capitol Broadcasting, SAS Institute, and The News and Observer (Triangle High Five, 2014). In November of 2003, the superintendents of these five school districts proposed a regional consortium for excellence in education that would focus on high school reform as well as the issue of high school dropouts (Triangle High Five, 2014). This initiative would raise expectations for student achievement and compel collaboration across districts to share best practices in attempt to improve public education within the region (Triangle High Five, 2014). The group's vision determined that all students will graduate with a high school diploma and well-prepared to pursue higher education and a career of their choice

(Triangle High Five, 2014). Specifically, through the outcomes of professional learning communities, the group developed goals to:

1. Increase student achievement
2. Increase graduation rates and college and career readiness
3. Reduce student retention and dropout rates,
4. Improve teaching and learning and
5. Provide professional development opportunities for teachers, administrators, and school staff (Triangle High Five, 2014).

Over the next few months, a steering committee worked on details of the initiative, and High Five became a 501(c) corporation (Triangle High Five, 2014). Board members for High Five were recruited and a kick-off event was planned on April 2, 2004, with five corporate sponsors and five school systems announcing a five-year, 2.5 million dollar commitment to improve the area's high schools (Triangle High Five, 2014). Table 1 depicts area dropout figures for the initiation of the committee's work.

Occasionally, issues emerge such as dropout and graduation rates which draw attention from federal, state, and local organizations. A synthesis of existing data indicated that Johnston County Schools had a problem with increasing dropouts and decreasing graduates. Leadership at the district level and in the schools appeared to have little concern for their at-risk student population. The district's principals knew the issue existed but were hesitant to enact change until the superintendent directed them to do so. Eventually, leadership at the state level placed dropout percentages in each school's accountability model. High numbers of dropouts would prevent teachers from receiving bonus money. These attempts would force principals and

Table 1

Triangle High Five Districts Dropout Rate Comparison

Grades 9-12	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
Chapel Hill-Carrboro	1.40	0.95	1.19	1.02	0.60
Durham	4.26	4.32	3.67	3.55	3.21
Johnston	4.58	3.71	3.28	2.65	1.95
Orange	3.62	2.88	2.37	2.46	2.28
Wake	3.47	3.53	3.25	2.83	1.95
State	4.27	3.75	3.43	3.01	2.45

Note. Johnston County Data Report, 2014.

teachers to change their attitudes regarding at-risk students. Graduation rates were also a part of the federal No Child Left Behind regulations, and if schools wanted to attain Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP), they would have to do a better job of keeping all students engaged in the learning process and graduating on time.

In the winter of 2008, former superintendent, Superintendent Dr. Anthony Parker, declared that the Johnston County School System would reduce its dropout rate by fifty percent from 430 to 215 students. The majority of educators who worked in the system realized that many students were dropping out of school, and that the issue was becoming a serious blemish on the Johnston County Schools stellar, statewide reputation. The superintendent's mandate was embedded in the belief that academic inequality and varied levels of scholastic achievement among the district's students, was based upon cultural, racial, gender and socioeconomic factors. Global competition for well-trained students and a faltering local economy emerged as current issues, affecting all areas of the educational process. The superintendent, in addition to other school leaders throughout the region and across the nation, deemed it appropriate that a thorough examination of the underperformance of students in housing projects and rural country sides occur (Muhammad, 2015). Public perception had changed. These students were now as important as their peers who lived in affluent neighborhoods.

In response to the superintendent's directives, the district set a goal for the remainder of the school year which was to find and return to school as many dropouts as possible. This goal was based on the fact that the final dropout count would not be calculated until the twentieth day of the next school year according to state law. Later in the spring, high school principals in the district were provided a spreadsheet detailing the students who had dropped out of school that year. The list was comprehensive in that it provided the ages of the dropouts, reasons noted for

quitting school, and offered a thorough analysis of each dropout's attendance and academic profile. To help improve the district's graduation rate, seniors with enough credits to graduate were targeted and encouraged to return to school.

Superintendent Parker's directive was supported by additional resources in the form of additional personnel and a student advocate. School board policies and regulations were changed as a result. A significant change in the district policy was the development of the Alternative Graduation Program to aid and support at-risk students in their effort to graduate from high school within their four year window of opportunity. The district allowed qualifying students to enroll in a course of study that called for the completion of twenty-four credits to satisfy local requirements for graduation. Students who elected to enter this alternative to the traditional path were identified in the eighth grade and understood that upon graduation, admission to a four-year university would not be possible due to their completed program of study. With parental support required, approximately one hundred students enrolled in the program at the beginning of the 2009 school year. Participating students were enrolled in three, rather than four classes per day, and were assigned a mandatory study hall for the purpose of obtaining small group instruction, completing assigned homework, and researching potential careers after high school. Several schools within the district based their career exploration focus on the Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills (TEKS) for career connections and investigation. The TEKS courses held students accountable to several expectations, but because career exploration is only one facet of what motivates students to take ownership of their futures, additional resources were added to help students establish and consolidate their identities create a comprehensive ten-year life plan, master the skills and attitudes of a resilient personality, and, most importantly, understand the consequences of dropping out of school (Dedmond, 2008).

In order to effectively combat the issue of students not graduating with their cohort, the role of the student advocate was discussed at length by involved stakeholders within the district. This newly created position was created for an individual with a passion for working with at-risk students. In addition, to the support provided by student advocates, guidance counselors were encouraged to use non-traditional methods of schooling like Evening Academy, NovaNet Credit recovery, and summer school to keep students in school and, more importantly, on track to graduate with their cohort.

In 2013, current superintendent Dr. H. Edward Croom endorsed a plan to change the name of "student advocate" to "graduation coach," thus, signifying a change in attitude that recovering dropouts was no longer enough. The current emphasis is to re-engage the at-risk student and assist them to earn the necessary credits for a high school diploma within a four-year window of time. Various initiatives, interventions, and programs that will be discussed later in this effort are being utilized to accomplish this goal.

Student disengagement was presented as being a problem that extended beyond the confines of the high school and into the domains of elementary and middle schools. Principals and teachers at all three levels were charged with the task of changing school culture in the attempt to persuade students to stay in school and on course to graduate. In an attempt to promote collaboration and vertical alignment between each high school and its feeder schools, the superintendent mandated quarterly meetings for the groups with the provision that minutes and notes reflect the discussion of how to successfully engage and combat the dropout and graduation issues. Minutes from these sessions were to be forwarded to the superintendent in a timely manner.

In another attempt to impress upon the principals in the district the seriousness of the dropout and graduation rates, the superintendent required that all Drop Out Prevention (DOT7) forms, a state form that must be completed when a student drops out of school, be signed by the principal. Guidance counselors had previously been assigned the task of signing this form. Any form signed by anyone other than the principal would be returned to the submitting school. The principal along with the student advocate were encouraged to collaborate in completing the DOT7 to ensure all attempts had been made to prevent the student from dropping out of school. Additionally, any DOT7 submitted for a student in the senior year of high school required a detailed list of interventions that had been enacted in an attempt to keep the senior in school. It was the superintendent's belief that by dictating the principal take a more significant role in this process; students may be encouraged and elect to remain in school.

Since the formation of compulsory public education, students have left school and not graduated with their class on a regular basis. What prompted the Board of Education in Johnston County along with the superintendent to focus attention on the issue of recovering dropouts and improving graduation rates now and not before? The district's growing number of dropouts and lagging graduation rate continued to dominate conversation while attention generated towards other celebrations within the district such as: Scholastic Aptitude Scores (SAT) scores, End of Course (EOC) results, and the narrowing of the achievement gap diminished. The board recognized that the district was regarded throughout the state and nation as a progressive and student-centered unit. However, they were not satisfied with efforts to reduce dropouts and improve graduation rates.

Each year when the state's dropout information is released, Johnston County continues to lag behind others in the region. This combined with federal mandates regarding dropout and

graduation rates prompted the school board to direct the superintendent to take significant steps in attempting to quell the rising number of students who were not graduating from high school. The board genuinely wanted the number of dropouts to decrease and the number of graduates to increase, but also did not want to lag behind when compared to other districts in the region. It was natural process for the superintendent and principals to collaborate with others in the region to learn more about "best practices" in an attempt to rectify both issues. Ideas that were synthesized and implemented in Johnston County included specific programs such as Advancement via Individual Determination (AVID), and additional personnel in the form of the at-risk counselors, student advocates, and graduation coaches. Further, changes in board policy to embrace the Alternative Graduation Program for at-risk students were enacted.

Principals within the district were now more aware than ever before that dropout and graduation rates would also be calculated in their yearly school composite score. Good test scores and satisfactory attendance averages would no longer suffice; something had to be done about students not graduating from school within the window of opportunity. This type of federal intervention with regards to decreasing the number of dropouts in the district, while increasing the number of graduates in the district fits under the adoption model of federalism. In simple terms, if schools in Johnston County did not decrease their dropout rate and increase their graduation rate, they would lose federal money. Over the last several years, a primary focus of the Johnston County School System has been to reduce its dropout rate and increase the system's graduation rate. Additionally, higher degrees of accountability are in place at the federal, state, and local levels which have increased number of students are not graduating from school at an alarming rate due to greater expectations and increased academic rigor. The school district, like others in the region, state, and nation, finds itself battling to keep students engaged and in school,

during a time when it is more customary to leave school prior to graduation and enter the world of work. In recent years, the graduation rate issue has been magnified due to an unstable and sluggish domestic economy. The concern of dropouts sapping local resources and not contributing to the economy as greatly as those who receive a high school diploma has become the source for heated debate among various groups of stakeholders. The school district has embraced “best practices” from other districts across the nation in an attempt to stop students from dropping out of school and keep them on track to graduate from high school. However, the fact remains that Johnston County Schools does not have a plan to improve the four year Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate.

During the first five years of the High Five initiative, the superintendents, principals, teachers, counselors, and other school staff realized that professional learning communities were a powerful tool in supporting student achievement and that the original high school reform effort had evolved into a K-12 collaborative effort (Triangle High Five, 2014). As each high school embraced the guiding principles of a professional learning community, it became evident to stakeholders that the entire school district should work together in similar manner (Triangle High Five, 2014). Ensuring that all children are healthy, safe, engaged, supported, and challenged is fundamental for students to become college, career, and citizenship ready (Whole Child Newsletter, 2011). Policies and practices that drive instruction need to be realigned to support the whole child, and that includes a change in how adults work together (Whole Child Newsletter, 2011.). Professional learning communities have emerged as perhaps the best, most agreed-upon means of continual improvement in instruction and student performance (Whole Child Newsletter, 2011).

The federal No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 created the School Dropout Prevention Program. The purpose of this program is to provide three-year grants to states and school districts to assist in dropout prevention, school re-entry activities, and diploma attainment. Local school districts must demonstrate the effectiveness of their strategy, based on scientific research (Swanson, 2010). To date, some schools within Johnston County have not embraced this opportunity to its fullest potential in their collective attempt to reduce the number of dropouts in the district while increasing the number of graduates.

As accountability and standards continue to dominate school policy, many experts indicate the additional pressure to perform may cause some students to quit school. Today's students are preparing to enter a world in which colleges and businesses are demanding more than ever before. To ensure all students are college and career ready, the Common Core State Standards were developed to establish consistent guidelines for what every student should know and be able to do in math and English language arts from kindergarten through twelfth grade. Measures encompassing these standards utilize formulas that take into account a specific school's progress in regards to dropout and graduation rates. This trend has motivated school leaders to implement strategies to keep students in school, but is not enough being done to assist these students to graduate.

On a regular basis, Johnston County Schools has led the state in many areas of academic achievement. Tables 2 and 3 illustrate the historical dropout problems of the district in comparison to the state. Johnston County has led the triangle-area school districts in the area of dropout rates. Fortunately, those rates have been reversed, and the district's rate is much lower than in previous years. Unfortunately, the district's graduation rate has not increased as much

Table 2

Johnston County Schools and North Carolina Five Year Dropout Rate Comparison

Grades 9-12	2008-2009	2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013
Johnston County	4.58	3.71	3.28	2.65	1.95
North Carolina	4.27	3.75	3.43	3.01	2.45

Note. Johnston County Schools Data Report, 2014.

Table 3

Johnston County Schools and North Carolina Four Year Cohort Graduation Comparison

Year	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Johnston County	74.4	78.7	82.4	82.5	85.4
North Carolina	74.2	77.9	80.4	82.5	83.9

Note. Johnston County Schools Data Report, 2014.

when compared to the district's success in reducing the number of students dropping out of school.

The issue in Johnston County affects all groups of students, particularly minority students. Students who left school without a diploma reported the major obstacles to their academic success were attendance, academic issues, and the decision to work rather than complete school. Leaders throughout the county now see this issue as not being strictly an educational problem but one that also has ramifications of a social, moral, and financial nature. The district's graduation rate mirrors that of North Carolina's at 82.5% (Hui, 2013). Based upon this information, it appears there is much work to be done to achieve the national goal of 90% by the year 2020 (America's Promise Alliance, 2008). The Johnston County Schools district graduation rate of 82.5% is unacceptable. A more relevant and personalized plan must be developed and implemented in an effort to improve the district graduation rate to 90%.

Study Organization

In the spring of 2014, Dr. Croom discussed in the district's weekly cabinet meeting the desire and need to have a clear, concise, and easily implementable Graduation Improvement Plan. The initiative would be a collaborative effort amongst all departments in the district and would address concerns primarily at the high school and middle school levels but would also examine the issue from an elementary perspective. The district's work to date in improving the graduation rate closely resembled the work detailed from the National Dropout Prevention Center. In fact, the Center is often used as resource in developing initiatives to address the issue. It was determined by central stakeholders that a strong correlation existed between reducing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates; therefore, the Center's resources may assist in developing a plan to help more students graduate from high school.

Fortunately for the district, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (NDPCN) was offering a Diploma Plan Institute in the summer to help school districts across the nation increase their graduation rates (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2011). Dr. Croom and the cabinet members decided it would benefit the district to send a team to participate in the Institute and research strategies to share with other stakeholders within the district in the effort to increase the numbers of graduates from high school.

While participating in the event, the district level team determined the task at hand would need to be broken down into smaller, more manageable tasks. The immediate goal would be “thinking through” the planning process in the development of a Graduation Improvement Plan (GIP) for the district, followed by creating a draft document to present to stakeholders within the school system. It was determined by the group that the final step in the process would be implementation of the document or plan during the 2015-2016 school year.

Much of the early conversation among the group focused on how the plan would be used or implemented at the school level. The group decided the GIP would be used for the following: an outline for reports of progress and outcomes, a guide for decision making, a motivator for action, and a monitor of system progress. The team also discussed desired outcomes and agreed upon the following: better understanding of critical dropout prevention components, a closer examination of the district’s current dropout prevention plan, and most importantly, specific action steps to improve graduation rates.

After summarizing the work of the district level team and with strategies recommended by the NDPCN Diploma Plan Institute, the GIP plan will be developed using the specific areas of data application, student and staff learning, community involvement, and climate and culture.

Through the attention to alignment in these four areas, a proposed iterative graduation improvement model can be developed.

Data Application

The district already valued data-driven decision making as it pertained to high academic achievement. What does the data indicate when examining who was dropping out of school and why? Table 4 illustrates the reasons Johnston County Students provide for dropping out of school; while Table 5 depicts the comparisons of four year graduation rates in the high schools of Johnston County. In addition, Figure 1 provides the percentage of students who are dropping out of the high schools by ethnicity.

Leaders within the district recognize that at-risk students who drop out of school and elect to return to school are in need of additional supports to experience favorable outcomes. The student is often labeled as a “failure” by peers, and this type of negative reinforcement creates difficulty for the student to successfully re-engage. Students are often hand-scheduled by counselors and administrators in the attempt to place the student in contact with more empathetic teachers. This type of teacher may be more likely to embrace the student as a whole and have a greater acceptance of the non-traditional learner. Characteristics of the empathetic teacher include patience, flexibility, and compassion. The empathetic teacher maintains the expectation of high academic achievement in a way in which the at-risk student positively responds and experiences success.

Student and Staff Learning

The superintendent’s vision for a systemic plan may contradict the district’s tradition of site-based management. However, with great clarity, the superintendent has indicated on several occasions that the district’s GIP will be identical for each school in the district and will be based

Table 4

2014 Johnston County Schools Dropouts: Rationale for Withdrawal

Reason Cited	Percentage	Number
Non-Relevant Work	33.0%	47
Community College	17.0%	25
Academic Rigor Difficulty	12.4%	18
Home Situation	12.4%	18
Work	11.0%	16
Moved	7.5%	11
Attendance	6.7%	10
Total	100%	145

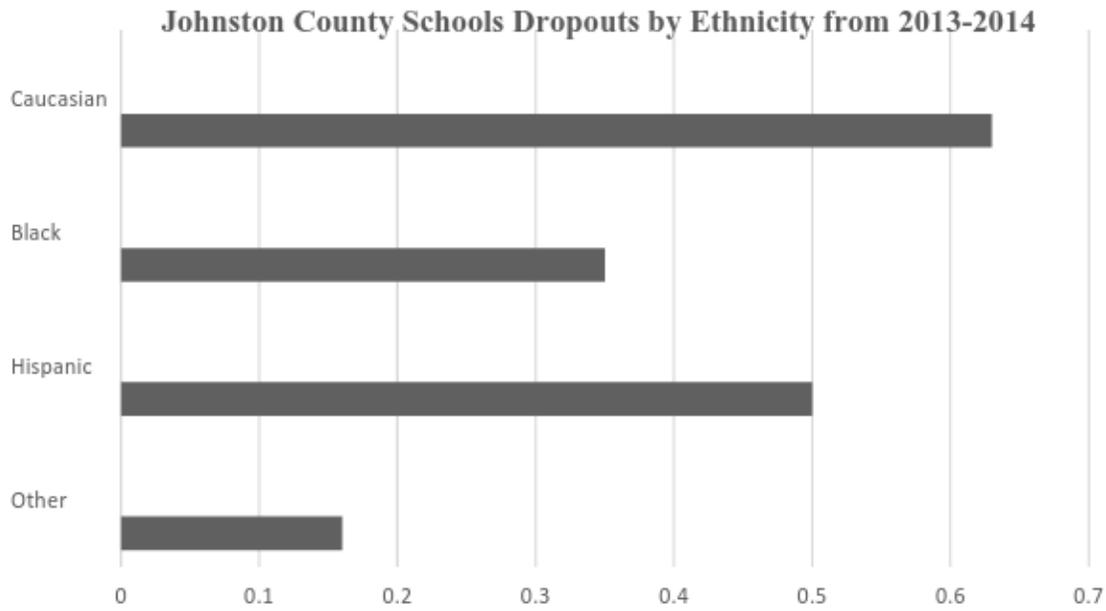
Note. Johnston County Schools Data Report, 2014.

Table 5

Johnston Four Year Cohort Graduation Comparison

JCS High Schools	2009	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014
Clayton	86.9%	85.1%	86.2%	87.5%	86.1%	87.9%
Cleveland	NA	NA	NA	NA	93.8%	89.5%
Corinth	NA	NA	NA	NA	93.1%	85.5%
JCS Middle College	83.3%	90.6%	88.7%	96.3%	95.0%	96.7%
North Johnston	72.1%	68.0%	75.0%	85.5%	82.7%	81.15%
Princeton	76.9%	80.4%	78.4%	85.5%	84.5%	88.2%
South Campus	6.7%	24.1%	27.3%	33.3%	33.0%	26.7%
Smithfield-Selma	61.1%	60.8%	69.3%	72.3%	75.1%	78.5%
South Johnston	70.6%	72.2%	76.7%	79.7%	76.6%	92.1%
West Johnston	81.2%	84.2%	87.9%	89.0%	84.7%	87.4%

Note. Johnston County Schools Data Report, 2014.



Note. Johnston County Data Report 2014.

Figure 1. Dropouts by ethnicity per 100 students from 2013-2014 for Johnston County Schools.

on proven strategies. Strategies to be considered shall include: visibility, formative evaluation of classroom instruction, teacher clarity, and teacher-student relationships. Items currently in place that possibly should be considered for termination include: homework, attention to smaller class sizes, ability grouping, enhancement calendar, and retentions.

Community Involvement

Can the problem of low graduation rates be solved by the school system alone? If not, who will help school employees accomplish this task? The GIP Team has identified the following agencies as potential resources in collaborating to increase graduation rates within Johnston County. These include: Communities in Schools, the local business alliances, faith-based partnerships, and civic organizations.

Climate and Culture

Several questions related to climate and cultures were posed to include: How is culture and climate built within a school where students are engaged and desire to attend school? How are resources and assistance offered to the adults in the building to help facilitate the learning process in this manner? Information generated by the team was shared with principals in the district during a fall Principal's Meeting. Possible strategies were shared prior to the meeting and team members facilitated grade-alike sessions for all principals during the PLC (Professional Learning Community) portion of the meeting. Principals were asked to share comments and feedback based on the strategies presented.

During the 2015-2016 school year, principals will participate in a survey and a set of "best practices" will be established. This collection of information will be used to create a "blueprint" of a graduation plan which will be shared with principals for consensus. Once the "blueprint" has been revised, it will be taken to the superintendent's senior cabinet for review

and input. The plan will be applied throughout the spring term while the four year graduation cohort is being reviewed and assisted as they approach graduation. Once the term has ended, the plan will be reviewed and revised for the next school year.

Most recently within the district, municipal leaders have expressed dissatisfaction with the apparent inadequate education being received by Smithfield area students. John Lampe, mayor of Smithfield, has encouraged constituents to “raise bloody hell” and “lob rotten tomatoes” at school board members based upon his perception of Smithfield-area schools. Concerning to the mayor are low test scores, dropouts, and graduation rates in culmination of his stance that students in these specific schools are not receiving an equal education as required by state law (Campbell, Hui, & Seligson, 2004). Lampe states “the school board will not voluntarily move from their position” and “from their world view, I’m an idiot, and they’re the ones doing everything right” (Campbell et al., 2014). “In my world view, I think they’ve seriously damaged the town of Smithfield and the kids who go to that school” (Campbell et al., 2014). The mayor has indicated that he is willing to present litigation against the school system based on data indicating students are not receiving an equal education and has offered no timeline for filing a civil complaint (Campbell et al., 2014). To reverse the attendance area’s current direction, some town leaders favor an approach endorsed by Elizabeth Haddix, a staff attorney at the UNC Center for Civil Rights (Campbell et al., 2014). She argues that the Johnston County Board of Education should make the Smithfield-area schools better by making it more affluent (Campbell et al., 2014). The Board can do this, she says, by redrawing attendance boundaries to balance socioeconomic diversity at high-poverty Smithfield-Selma and low poverty Cleveland High School, just ten miles away (Campbell et al., 2014).

Although a tremendous amount of work has occurred within the district over the last several years to improve graduation rates, there remains much work to be done before the problem of low graduation rates has been eradicated. Therefore, Johnston County Schools needs to focus on raising its four-year graduation rate by creating a graduation improvement plan.

Purpose of the Study

The ever-increasing departure of students from school prior to graduating is not a new or unique problem within the current educational system. Russell (2009) presented promising dropout prevention strategies to treat the *silent epidemic* of students dropping out of school. Even though these numerous studies have increased awareness and knowledge, there remains a considerable limitation today in assisting all students to graduate from school. In spite of decades of research on dropouts and prevention programs, the question persists, how can there be a *silent epidemic*?

Information from researchers (Curley, 1991; Groth, 1998; Hoyle & Collier, 2006; Littky, 2002; Malloy, 1995; Montecel, Cortez, & Cortez, 2004) indicates the problem lingers due to (a) unreliable, inconsistent, and inaccurate reporting of dropouts to state education agencies; (b) increased expectations and high-stakes testing; (c) flawed perceptions that dropout prevention programs offer minimal skills or practical knowledge to meet societal demands; (d) reactive and punitive interventions utilizing law enforcement officers, criminal justice systems, or public prosecutors to deal with the issue; (e) inadequate teacher preparation programs; (f) inequitable distribution of funding and support services to districts with higher populations of diverse students and (g) emphasis on changing students as opposed to systemic change. With the current mandate from the President of the United States to raise graduation rates, it is imperative to continue to assess the situation in rectifying the problem of low graduation rates. School district

superintendents and education leaders must overcome the financial and societal challenges to meet this requirement (Hoyle & Collier, 2006) as there is limited funding as well as the lack of a universally accepted graduation plan for districts to implement. Since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) mandate, researchers (Fernandez & Shu, 1988; Hoyle & Collier, 2006) reported that school systems across the United States have initiated multiple initiatives to design dropout prevention programs to address the problem of improving graduation rates.

After a thorough examination of each of these plans in the literature review, the programs are classified into six types. These six types are as follows:

1. A counseling or mentoring program coupled with regular individualized support from a classroom teacher.
2. A work-study program consisting of daily instruction in addition to vocational training to provide students the opportunity to work.
3. Programs focusing on new and creative learning activities and parental involvement.
4. Programs embracing the benefits of an alternative learning environment such as a smaller more intimate setting to provide instruction to students.
5. Programs which emphasize new strategies to improve daily attendance rates.
6. Programs based upon the use of positive reinforcement strategies consisting of rewards and incentives to encourage students to remain in school and receive their diploma.

The purpose of this case study is to analyze a graduation improvement plan for Johnston County Schools that will improve the district's four year cohort graduation rate to 90%. Through this study, the work of administrative stakeholders in the Johnston County School system and their

recommendations for creating a graduation plan to improve the four year cohort graduation rate to 90%.

Significance of the Study

National, state, and local graduation rates have been topics of concern for the government, school officials, and society as a whole. Many students throughout the country and in the state of North Carolina are not successfully graduating from high school in the traditional four-year period. As a result, the students' likelihood of committing crime, becoming incarcerated, living in poverty, and lacking skills for sustained employment increases (Lochner & Moretti, 2004). In response to Johnston County's low graduation rate and the federal government's expectation of increased graduation rates, the superintendent of Johnston County Schools, Dr. H. Edward Croom expressed his desire that the district develop a graduation plan that identifies strategies to help at-risk students in elementary, middle, and high school. School leaders within the district have identified several risk factors that may contribute to students dropping out of school and not graduating. The risk factors include academic problems, issues passing standardized state assessments, substance abuse, discipline, and problems with attendance.

Through this study the researcher sought to identify programs and strategies that will help students be successful in school and graduate in the regular window of time. It is important to discuss this topic so decision makers within the district understand which interventions are successful in improving student graduation rates.

Results of the study will provide information to school administrators and assist them as they make informed decisions using the best strategies available to help students remain engaged in the learning process and attaining a diploma in four years. Further, study results may provide

insight for future budget discussions regarding programs and initiatives which target increased graduation rates. Students, parents, community leaders, teachers, and local building administrators will benefit from this study by utilizing results which provide information to combat risk factors contributing to student disengagement, as well as accessing strategies to decrease drop outs and increase graduations rates of at-risk students.

The research holds significance for society as it addresses the fiscally responsible use of public funds during a time when many systems are facing budget cuts and the elimination of educational programs without a direct instructional impact.

Study Questions

1. What are the perceived key elements of a graduation plan and how can they be consistently implemented in each of the schools in Johnston County?
2. What impact if any, has the High Five initiative had on the graduation rate for students who attend the Johnston County School System?
3. What impact, if any, has the High Five initiative had on the graduation rates of students in Johnston County schools with regards to ethnicity and gender?
4. Are there specific groups of students who should receive enhanced programming and services so he/she may graduate from high school with their cohort?

Study Design

Chapter three will describe the method that will be used to collect, analyze and synthesize the research and anecdotal data that will be collected from the school principals and teachers related to institutionalizing a plan to improve the high school graduation rate in the Johnston County Schools. The case study research method for this task will be described and followed by an explanation of the researcher's role as a stakeholder in the final outcome(s). The researcher

will fully describe the case study methodology and any related assumptions that have made prior to and during this process. A chapter summary will be provided.

This study is an inquiry that focuses on data generated from surveys and focus groups with principals, graduation coaches, and district level administrators in Johnston County Schools with the intent to provide information pertinent to improving graduation rates within the school district.

Definition of Terms

For clarification purposes, the following terms are defined:

Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) - The Adjusted Cohort Graduation Rate (ACGR) is a method for tracking a group of students who enter high school together as first-time 9th graders (or 10th graders, in schools that begin in 10th grade) and graduate “on time” (i.e., within three or four years) with a regular diploma. The ACGR accounts (or adjusts) for students who transfer into a school, transfer to another school in the state, or die (America’s Promise Alliance 2008). The ACGR is based on a state’s ability to follow individual students. This is made feasible by assigning a single student identifier to each student. Most states calculate the ACGR at the state, school district, and school level (America’s Promise Alliance, Appendix J, 2008).

Averaged Freshman Graduation rate (AFGR) - This is a method developed by the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) after convening panels of experts to make recommendations about the most effective strategy to calculate graduation rates in the absence of data systems based on individual students identifiers. The AFGR does not account for transfers in or out (American’s Alliance Promise, 2009).

Dropout - Each year the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction produces a Dropout Data, Collecting, and Reporting Manual to aid and assist school personnel in accurately calculating the dropout rate. The method used in North Carolina to count dropouts is called an event count. It counts the number of dropouts during a school year, beginning on the first day of the academic year and ending on the last day of the subsequent summer vacation. All school systems and schools in North Carolina are to use the following definition for a dropout. To ensure accuracy and consistency in reporting dropouts, dropout prevention coordinators should become thoroughly familiar with the definition and its interpretations based on state laws and policies. A dropout is an individual who was enrolled in school at some time during the reporting year; was not enrolled on day twenty of the current year; has not graduated from high school or completed a state or district approved educational program; and does not meet any of the following reporting exclusions: transferred to another public school district, private school, home school or state/district approved educational program (not including programs at community colleges); temporarily absent due to suspension or school approved illness; or death. For purposes of applying the state's dropout definition, the following additional definitions also apply: a school year is defined as the period of time beginning with the first day opening of school to the last day of summer vacation; students who attend school until the end of the reporting year do not count as dropouts in the reporting year if they enroll in school anytime during the first twenty days of the current school year; and students who drop out before the end of the reporting year must be enrolled on the twentieth day of the current year in order not to be counted as dropouts.

All students receiving dropout status are counted as dropouts from the last grade and school in which they were actually enrolled. A school completer has graduated from high school

or has completed an approved education program upon receipt of formal recognition from school authorities. A state- or district-approved program may include special education programs, home-based instruction, and school-sponsored elementary or secondary programs leading to some other certification differing from the regular diploma. At a minimum, a district-approved program must meet state standards. Therefore, a student who withdraws from high school and enrolls in a district-sponsored GED preparation program must be reported as a dropout (just as those who withdraw to attend community college GED and Adult High School Diploma programs are reported as dropouts).

Dropout Factories - These are schools in which the reported 12th grade enrollment is 60 percent or less than the 9th grade enrollment three years earlier (America's Promise Alliance, 2008).

Common Core - The development of the Common Core State Standards began in 2009 when a group of governors and local state superintendents began discussing how useful it would be if there were state standards in the two basic subject areas of English language arts and mathematics. This would help students who move within their K-12 education. It would also help textbook developers be more efficient, and it would provide consistency for students throughout the American nation. The National Governor's Association and the Council of Chief State School Officers provided support for this initiative.

The Common Core State Standards were developed based on research and evidence in mathematics learning and English language arts. The standards are aligned with current college and work expectations, and they are benchmarked against international standards. Standards were included in the framework if they were considered to be essential for college and career readiness in today's global and competitive society and economy.

Perspective on rigor varies depending on what individuals have experienced in their own education. For some, the new standards will not seem more difficult because they may have chosen a course of study that is not particularly difficult or challenging. For others, the new standards will be much more difficult and challenging than what they are used to mastering. Regardless, proficiency levels and promotion standards will be impacted by a higher level of overall rigor.

As the economy and the world change, it is necessary to alter the standards for student learning to ensure that students are prepared for the future and not the past. North Carolina has utilized a Standard Course of Study for many decades, and throughout those years, the standards have been evaluated and updated on a regular basis by the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction in conjunction with the university and community college systems as well as local educators. The State Board of Education has the final authority to adopt the course of study for North Carolina public schools.

Graduate! - Graduate! is an innovative program in Johnston County that provides personalized educational experiences to high school senior dropouts by allowing them the opportunity to re-engage in non-traditional educational settings, earn their high school diploma, and become job-ready. Support offered may include online as well as face to face courses, tutoring, mentoring, career and job coaching, housing, and mental health services. This initiative is a collaborative effort between Johnston County Schools, Johnston County Industries, and Pathways to Life Inc. The main goals of the program are to eliminate any barriers that exist for students, provide academic support, ensure successful completion of graduation requirements, and prepare graduates for life after high school by providing opportunities that will enhance

workforce preparedness. It is imperative that a Graduate! student have a personalized plan for success, ensuring consistent awareness, both academically and personally.

Since June of 2011, the program has enrolled 173 former dropouts, 95 of whom have earned a high school diploma through Graduate! Of that specific number, 95% of the graduates are fully employed or enrolled in community college classes (based solely on exit interviews with students). The program initially enrolled thirty five students but has grown because of its need and non-traditional approach and now is able to successfully sustain over fifty students. Based on the most current data, eleven students have returned to traditional high school with seven graduating, and twenty five students have not successfully completed the program.

Johnston County Schools' dropout rate has significantly decreased within the last four years, dropping from a high of 4.58 in 2008-2009 to 2.65 in 2011-2012. The actual number of dropouts decreased from 426 in 2008-2009 to 257 dropouts in 2011-2012. The district's graduation rate increased from a low of 72.8% in 2008-2009 to 82.5% in 2012-2013. Johnston County has gone from fifty three senior dropouts in 2008-2009 to thirteen senior dropouts in 2012-2013(Johnston County Schools Student Services, 2014)

Evening Academy - The Johnston County Schools Evening Academy is a non-traditional academic environment that allows students the opportunity to complete online coursework in an attempt to recover credit lost due to lack of success within the traditional school setting. Students who have failing grades, problems with attendance, personal health issues, and other unforeseen circumstances are candidates for this program. The program is also structured to help students with skills and attendance recovery. Certified high school teachers work with at-risk students throughout the process of earning high school credits. The common goal for all involved is for students to satisfy the requirements for graduation and diploma attainment.

Although the environment of this program promotes collaboration and flexibility, high expectations remain in place with regards to appropriate behavior and attendance.

Nova Net - Johnston County utilized NovaNET Courseware as the tool for credit recovery in the initiative's formative stages (Pearson, 2011). NovaNet Courseware is drawn from Pearson Education's instructional content and delivered on a web platform that uses a standard web browser (Pearson, 2011). NovaNET is a learning management system known for its rigor and completeness of curriculum, including engaging and instructionally relevant materials as well as a research-based instructional design (Pearson, 2011).

Mastery is at the heart of NovaNET Courseware, testing each learning objective using formative and summative assessments (Pearson, 2011). A beneficial feature of NovaNET Courseware was the idea that each student has a personal instructor who can change the mastery level for a student with special needs, personalize courses with different study plan options, create a discussion forum for enrolled students, and attach an additional, customized assessment that the student creates (Pearson, 2011).

NovaNET Courseware has a built in Basic Achievement Skills Inventory (BASI) that allows for quick and easy student evaluations in mathematics, reading, and language arts skills for initial placement (Pearson, 2011). The program of study contains the entire core high school curricula with courses to cover all four years of high school in the four main subject areas (Pearson, 2011). The program is appealing based upon the flexibility to individualize learning plans and serve a wide variety of needs like virtual schools, dropout prevention, credit recovery, alternative instruction, summer school, distance learning and homebound instruction, special education, and Response to Intervention (RTI) (Pearson, 2011). However, as well as NovaNet

served the district's students during the infancy of credit recovery, other programs soon proved to be just as effective and more economical with regards to pricing.

Education 2020 - This virtual learning program allows students to connect education from their past toward the goal of a high school diploma. Education 2020 is a computer multimedia program designed to help students recover and accrue credits toward graduation by offering core and elective classes in a virtual setting. The curriculum is designed to meet state curriculum benchmarks and guidelines. Classes begin with vocabulary words followed by lectures and instruction offered by teachers in virtual classrooms. Next, students are required to complete practice problems and are allowed to review lectures and enhance their knowledge on the selected topic of study. After these steps are completed, the student takes a quiz, on which they must score 70% or higher to earn a passing grade. As a student progresses through the coursework, quizzes are taken at the end of each module. Then, a final test is taken that is comprised of information from each module, and the student must attain a score of 70% or higher to earn credit for the course.

Education 2020 allows students to work in a self-pace manner at home or in the school-provided environment. The quizzes and tests must be taken at the school with site facilitators ensuring fidelity and helping students achieve satisfactory daily progress. Typically, students work on one course at a time, but on a rare occasion, a few students will move back and forth between the courses in an effort to vary up their school day. The program is also used to help supplement the district's summer school initiative.

Education 2020 offers traditional courses in math, algebra, social studies, and science as well as courses dealing with financial math, career planning, and environmental science for

students in grades 6-12. The courseware also has modules that help students prepare for state end-of-course tests and important standardized tests like the ACT and SAT.

Alternative Graduation Program - The Alternative Graduation Program is a high school course of study that specifically targets students who are at-risk of dropping out of school. High school graduation requirements for these students shall be the successful completion of the state minimum twenty one units of credit earned in grades nine through twelve and satisfying state End of Course testing requirements. The criterion for admission includes:

- any student with two grade-level retentions between kindergarten and grade twelve;
- any high school student who participated in a mid-year promotion from middle school to high school;
- any high school freshman who has fewer than three credits after the initial two semesters in grade nine;
- any high school students in grades nine through twelve who is unable to graduate within five years from the first high school enrollment date;
- any student who has been coded as a W2 (dropout) for reasons excluding the sole purpose of participation in the Alternative Graduation Program; and
- any other student with special circumstances who has the site administrator's approval to enter the program.

Students who enroll in the Alternative Graduation Program will first need the approval of their parents and/or guardians as well as the principal of the home school. The graduation coach, school counselor, and high school principal will sign off on the admission process and work collectively to ensure each student is placed in a position to be successful. Guided study halls for participants in the Alternative Graduation Program may be used to provide additional academic

support should the team decide this is a necessary measure for the student's success. If a student participates in the guided study hall, this class will not earn the student any credit toward graduation nor will the student receive a grade for the class.

Appropriate students enrolled in the Alternative Graduation Program will be referred to a supportive community agency in order to receive additional services. These services include but are not limited to job placement, career and college guidance, personal needs support, child care, medical advising, and psychological counseling.

Parents and students may opt out of the Alternative Graduation Program at any time and be subject to the general graduation requirements for the school. Consideration will be afforded to the student based on the fact that during his/her tenure with the Alternative Graduation Program, the student will have had reduced opportunities to earn course credit as opposed to traditional graduation expectations.

Students and parents recognize the fact that completion of the Alternative Graduation Program affords the student the opportunity to enroll in community college coursework; however, the Alternative Graduation Program diploma will not satisfy the requirements to be considered for admission to a four-year university.

Middle School Mid-Year Promotion Program - This program was developed for at-risk students in the middle school and is also referred to as the Fast Track Program. The intent of the program is to transition students from middle school to high school at the end of the first semester as opposed to waiting until the end of the school year to promote the students. Students eligible for the mid-year promotion have been retained at least once in elementary school as well as once in middle school. The attempt is to successfully transition them to high school before they become completely disillusioned with the learning process and contemplate dropping out of

school. A contract is signed by the student, parent, and principals responsible for the mid-year promotion, which addresses desired outcomes in the areas of academic achievement, student behavior, and regular daily attendance. Ideally, the conversation regarding the mid-year promotion takes place during the summer, and fall semester data is used to determine whether or not the student has accomplished the goals of the contract. All students who make the mid-year transition are placed in the Alternative Graduation Program.

Project Round-Up - On August 1 of each school year, selected Johnston County School employees initiate Project Round-Up. Led by graduation coaches and counselors and other central personnel, this coordinated effort seeks to recover dropouts from the previous school year by persuading the students and their parents to re-enroll in school for the coming school year. Multiple home visits are the norm in reconnecting with the dropout. Traditional and nontraditional options for earning credit are discussed, and an individualized program of study is created with input from all participating stakeholders. Support services are discussed, and community resources are contacted if necessary to ensure the returning student can navigate the journey to securing a diploma with as much ease as possible. The majority of dropouts are recovered during the period of time from August first - September first and are enrolled safely in school by the twentieth day of the new semester.

Graduation Coach - The graduation coach will implement all strategies as outlined by the district's dropout prevention plan. It will also be their responsibility to coordinate efforts with other school staff to decrease the dropout rate and increase the graduation rate at their school by acting on behalf of all students in need of support; this may be accomplished by facilitating prevention, intervention, and other support strategies as discussed in team meetings.

The graduation coach will have the following duties and responsibilities as pertaining to program implementation:

- along with the school counselor, develop a Graduation Plan for each at-risk student;
- utilize a system for identification of at-risk students;
- assist school administration in presenting an annual information session for all stakeholders concerning the role of the graduation coach;
- support school counselors in informing teachers about appropriate plans and strategies for at-risk students in the attempt to ensure each student has a graduation plan;
- conduct home visits, family meetings, and teacher consultations; and
- conduct exit interviews, re-entry interviews, and follow-up procedures with identified at-risk students.

With regards to counseling activities, the graduation coach has the following responsibilities:

- with the counselors' support, conduct classroom, small group, and individual sessions with students who are in danger of not graduating;
- assist counselors with at-risk students in utilizing school and community resources for academic remediation, enrichment, and career development; and
- assist counselors with at-risk students in scheduling courses and teachers that meet the specific needs of each student with consideration given to educational need, interest, and career goals.

The graduation coach will have the following assignments associated with program coordination:

- assist school administration with organizing faculty and staff presentations on effective teaching strategies and motivational techniques for at-risk students;
- help counselors and other staff members in facilitating parent education groups and other meetings that focus on the needs of at-risk students;
- serve as liaison to community agencies and a broker of resources for at-risk students; and
- partner with the school social worker and the school counselors in helping at-risk students graduate.

Student Advocate - The student advocate's mission is to reduce the dropout rate at the high school where assigned. This is accomplished by developing prevention, intervention, and therapeutic strategies for at-risk youth. The student advocate will assume a leadership role in designing and implementing an early identification system within the school to locate those students who need additional resources to be successful. The student advocate will maintain and safeguard a current list of at-risk students. The student advocate will facilitate remedial and alternative instruction, provide counseling for identified at-risk students, and coordinate efforts with other support personnel and agencies when necessary. The student advocate will also work on a limited basis with middle school students in the same high school attendance district. The purpose of working in the middle school is to work with those students with the most extreme at-risk behaviors in an attempt to enable a smooth transition from middle school to high school. The student advocate works directly under the supervision of the high school principal at the assigned school and is supported by members of the district's Student Services division.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF LITERATURE

This literature review will consist of the following topics: strategies which have proven successful in assisting students in securing a high school diploma, the dropout epidemic in the United States in terms of dropout prevention as well as graduation rates, discussion of different elements including why students drop out of school, what the nation's responses are in relation to high dropout rates, where the successes and failures are, the causes of low graduation rates, how low graduation rates relate to other issues like school dropouts, limited engagement in coursework, and academic as well as career preparedness beyond high school.

Dropout Rates in the United States

In the United States, the rate of student dropouts for every 7,000 students daily is one student in every twenty six seconds. This translates to about 1.3 million dropouts every year (Balfanz, Almeida, Steinberg, Santos, & Fox, 2009). About a third of all public high school students are not likely to graduate with their class (Balfanz et al., 2009). The percentage for females graduating is higher as compared to males, with percentages at 73% and 65% respectively (Nestor-Baker, 2010). Close to half of the students in public school who do not graduate belong to minority populations in the United States, including African-Americans, Latin-Americans, and Native-Americans (Balfanz et al., 2009). Students from low-income families have higher dropout rates, almost six times higher, than those in higher income families (Nestor-Baker, 2010).

Issues in language and cultural differences may also impact foreign-born students in United States high schools as their dropout rates are at 21% compared to 13% for students born in the United States to foreign parents (Child Trends, 2011). The dropout issue is more severe for some areas in the United States, with these areas being recognized as dropout factories.

About 15% of the high schools in the United States are considered to be dropout factories (Balfanz et al., 2009; Swanson, 2010). Minority students are likely enrolled in these high schools with unusually high dropout rates, including 35% African-Americans, 29% Hispanic, 19% Native American, 14% Asian and 7% other white students (Nestor-Baker, 2010). Considering approximately 2,000 high schools in the United States, close to 40% of freshmen students drop out of school before they reach their senior year (Balfanz et al., 2009). For developed countries, the United States ranks eighteenth when considering graduation rates (Balfanz et al., 2009). Even with interventions that have been implemented, graduation rates have remained virtually unchanged over the past thirty years (Balfanz et al., 2009). With that said, it is encouraging, however to note that the country's graduation rate has peaked at its highest point in the last twenty years. In 2008, approximately 72% of high school students graduated from high school.

Costs of Dropping Out of School

Dropping out of school can be costly not only to students but to taxpayers as well. The serious impact dropouts have on the country's workforce is concerning to all stakeholders (Nestor-Baker, 2010). One area of concern is that dropouts are less likely when compared to high school graduates to find regular employment. Dropouts are also more likely to fall into poverty within a year and three times more likely to become unemployed (WOSU, 2012). Dropouts are eight times more likely as compared to high school graduates to be incarcerated for various offenses and violations. They are also four times less likely to volunteer or participate in community projects in comparison to graduates (WOSU, 2012). Dropouts as a whole represent only 3% of actively engaged citizens in today's American society (WOSU, 2012). More often than not, a high school dropout will likely have a lower income in comparison to a high school

graduate. Based on 2005 statistics, the annual income for a high school dropout was approximately \$17,000 dollars while a high school graduate earned approximately \$26,000 dollars. College graduates, on the other hand, earn close to \$1 million dollars more in their lifetime as compared to high school dropouts (WOSU, 2012). In reviewing statistics of prison inmate populations that did not graduate from high school, 69% of inmates in county jails have not completed high school (WOSU, 2012). Additionally, 75% of state inmates and 59% of federal inmates have not completed the requirements for a high school diploma (WOSU, 2012). With at least half of the American workforce being comprised of employment requiring the minimum standard of a high school diploma, inmates without a high school diploma are likely to lose their jobs or not qualify for these positions altogether.

Reasons for Dropping Out of School

There are different reasons that prompt students to drop out of school. In some instances, the causes may simply be a reaction to a personal crisis; however, for middle and high school students, the result can involve an extended period of disengagement. The primary reason indicated by students who dropped out of school is that they do not see the relationship between staying in school and learning and how that learning correlates to their future and careers (Bridgeland, Balfanz, Moore, & Frient, 2010).

The reasons students drop out of school and the factors causing specific at-risk populations to drop out of school are truly multidimensional. Personal or social issues are considered as one factor for dropouts. These personal factors may include boredom within the classroom setting and what is perceived as a lack of relevance in a high school diploma (WOSU, 2012). Poor academic preparation and the inability to cope efficiently with school work can impact the student's ability to stay engaged in the learning process. The lack of parental

guidance and a problematic home environment may also contribute to the student's lack of success during the instructional day. Another common factor in a student's decision to drop out of school involves components of the school itself. Due to budget constraints, most schools have large student populations with even larger class sizes. The classroom atmosphere may be more negative or highly impersonal due to the increased number of students within the classroom. Situations like these contribute to the overall lack of success a student experiences during the day and contributes to the individual's decision to drop out of school (WOSU, 2012). Under such circumstances, students are more likely to be retained, as well as incur out-of-school suspensions and be excluded from extracurricular activities. Under these conditions, there remains a disconnect between the home and school regarding customs, language, and values (Lehr, 2004; Sparks, Johnson, & Akos, 2010).

The research on dropouts indicates how previously stated elements can complicate the learning process as well as revealing how the elements are related to one another. Much of the research focuses on what classroom teachers and building administrators can do in their attempt to "remedy" what they perceive as being "wrong" in their students. Unfortunately, most of the research fails to identify deficiencies within the school which may contribute to students deciding to drop out (Montecel, Cortez, & Cortez, 2004). In considering dropout rates, it would be practical to disregard the notion that students who drop out of school are deficient or lacking in some manner (WOSU, 2012). A more proactive view of assessing the dropout epidemic would explore proven strategies that help struggling students work through their problems while remaining successfully engaged in the learning process. Opportunities should be afforded to these students in the attempt to recognize and improve upon their existing strengths. Thus,

keeping them in school and improving their chances for future employment (Montecel et al., 2004).

Strategies in Preventing Dropouts

There are an abundance of programs that have been created to prevent students from dropping out of school. Depending on the specifics of the situation, as well as the demographics of the location, some programs appear to work better than others. Those programs and program strategies are discussed and analyzed in the following pages.

1. Identifying potential dropouts as early as possible based on certain risk factors.

In the book, United Way of America (2009), the writer stresses the importance of dropout prevention for at-risk students who have disengaged from the learning process and have strayed significantly off track in their studies. The collection and analysis of data is a major component when exploring and assessing the extent of the dropout issue. Early identification of at-risk students who need additional services and support is a necessary measure in ensuring authentic engagement occurs during the learning process (United Way of America, 2009). In a study by Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger and Smink, (2008) and MacIver and Groginsky (2011), the authors emphasize the importance of effective early warning measures. As low test scores, poverty, and minority status have a significant impact on students dropping out of school, these elements are far less definitive and predictive than other factors. In effect, these characteristics would not provide sufficient guidelines for securing strategies to combat the dropout issue particularly in schools and school districts where most students share such qualities. Other indicators like attendance, behavior, and course performance have demonstrated a higher predictive power in assessing the rationale for dropping out of school (Legters & Balfanz, 2010). As data was gathered and collected on high school dropouts in the Fall River

School District, officials were able to identify at-risk students within their schools and determine that several of their students had transportation issues which placed them in danger of dropping out of school. Based on this specific finding, schools were able to provide discounted bus fares for students and eliminate the potential reason for dropping out of school (Aarons, 2010; Sawchuk, 2010). The Central Valley School District's Reclaiming Our Youth Center assessed data that had been collected from the areas of attendance and suspensions to determine which students were more likely to drop out of school (WOSU, 2012). Officials tracked consecutive absences as well as unexcused absences from school. Attempts were made to persuade students to have better attendance, and school officials also reached out to the students' parents to help resolve the issue of absenteeism (Maxwell, 2010). The Wisconsin Center for Education Research developed an early warning system designed to target the number of academic credits earned by at-risk students for the purpose of helping these students graduate from high school and have more viable options for education and careers after graduation (Aarons, 2010).

2. Alternative Education Programs

Alternative Education Programs (AEPs) have been suggested as a potential strategy in improving high school graduation rates among at-risk students. Programs of this nature cover a wide range of options for students, and success often depends on how the program's resources directly respond to the individual needs of the student (WOSU, 2012). AEPs have evolved over time in number and quality and are considered by many as a viable option in helping at-risk students obtain their diplomas. This approach works best with learners who do not thrive in a traditional school environment. The alternative setting is often structured like a school within a school. In some cases it is designed as a totally different system of study or as an after-school program (WOSU, 2012). AEPs are supported and managed differently from state to state. In the United

States for the 2000-2001 school year, there were 11,000 known alternative schools with an enrollment of approximately 600,000 students (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007).

In the study conducted by Tyler and Lofstrom (2009), the authors studied dropout prevention programs based on the needs of specific students and groups of students. Tyler and Lofstrom (2009) discovered that programs seeking to decrease dropout rates work by increasing school attendance, increasing student engagement, improving student self-esteem, and helping students manage challenges and issues which may contribute to their likeliness of dropping out of school (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). In the late 1990s, the United States Department of Education's School Dropout Demonstration Assistance Program (SDDAP) conducted a vigorous evaluation of AEPs that relied upon federal money to finance their dropout prevention initiatives. Aside from the evaluative work done by the SDDAP, the What Works Clearinghouse (WWC), another entity housed within the United States Department of Education, was also able to provide evidence on the effectiveness of various dropout prevention activities. Data generated from these evaluations provides more accurate information on successful measures in decreasing dropout rates. The SDDAP evaluation described various dropout prevention activities and measured the level of impact each activity had on reducing dropouts. Specific strategies were appraised using randomly controlled experiments, and evaluations of each strategy were based on comparative data generated from the various test groups (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Effective school-restructuring strategies were the target of the evaluation. Different strategies were reviewed when considering middle school and high school implementation. Targeted interventions at the high school were grounded in community-based applications seeking to assist students who had already dropped out of school in pursuit of their General Education Development (GED), which is considered by most employers as the equivalent to a high school

diploma. The primary finding from the SDDAP assessment reveals that most of the participating programs did not have a significant impact on preventing dropouts (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998). However, those programs which did experience success in reducing dropouts will be evaluated for this review. Consistent throughout all SDDAP results is the fact that those strategies utilized to encourage students who had dropped out of school to obtain their GED were successful (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). While improving GED attainment may be a goal of many, it is unclear on whether or not it should be included as a tool for preventing dropouts.

The results from the work authorized by the WWC have yet to be proven as definitive. Numerous studies of several dropout prevention programs are currently underway (Institute of Educational Sciences, 2008). A few of the programs have undergone thorough evaluations, and effective conclusions have been drawn with regards to program effectiveness (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). These programs include various strategies including counseling, monitoring, curriculum redesign, financial incentives among students and families, and community services seeking to manage elements which may negatively impact school achievement and success (Institute of Education Sciences, 2008). Some of these programs were noted as having potential in terms of decreasing dropout rates (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

3. Check and Connect

The Check and Connect Model (University of Minnesota, 2008) funded by the United States Department of Education created a partnership among the University of Minnesota, local public school systems and community service organizations. The collaboration was initially established to target urban middle school students who were experiencing learning difficulties and behavioral issues during the regular school day in an attempt to decrease dropout rates within participating schools. The model was field-tested for students with and without learning

disabilities within the K-12 education spectrum (University of Minnesota, 2008). In general, the model seeks to coordinate services for students, families, schools, and the community in an effort to assist students in succeeding with their coursework and staying in school and graduating.

The program also partners participating students with mentors from the community and case workers as well. In the Check component of the program, adults working with each student monitor and evaluate grades and attendance on a regular basis (University of Minnesota, 2008). A report by the Institute of Education Sciences (2008) discussed how ninth-graders in the Check and Connect Model were less likely than non-participants to drop out of school. In another study examining the four-year cohort graduation rate of participating schools, 39% of participants dropped out of school compared to 58% of non-participants in the control group. Costs associated with implementation of the model totaled approximately \$1,400 per student participant during the 2001-2002 school year (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

4. Career Academies the School within a School Model

Career academies assist in providing effective strategies in decreasing the number of dropouts, especially for students considered to be at "high risk" for dropping out of school (Kemple & Snipes, 2000). Three components are featured in the career academy model. As a school-within-a-school program, students are placed in smaller learning environments and partnered with the same teachers for the majority of their high school experience. The curriculum is immersed with vocational offerings as well as the typical academic coursework. A partnership between the academy and local employers is an integral part of the plan in the attempt to expose students to sufficient career and work-based learning (Kemple & Snipes, 2000). Career academies were first used in the 1970s and have evolved over time to the point where over 1,500 academies currently exist throughout the country.

Evidence to support the work done by career academies is the growing number of students seeking to be affiliated with an academy. A study by Kemple (2000) of at-risk youth revealed that career academies helped decrease dropout rates from 32% to 21%. Based on information from 2004, local school districts spent an average of \$600 dollars more on academy students than non-academy students (Institute of Education Sciences, 2008).

5. High School Reform Models

The Talent Development High School Reform models are not typically associated with reducing the dropout rate, especially if the model's primary objective is restructuring aspects of the school or school day. Still, such models typically have goals tied to dropout prevention and increased graduation rates and focus on improving academic performance within the school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Common elements of reform models include the reorganization of the school into smaller learning communities, focusing on careers, high level English and math, family involvement, and college preparatory studies. Various reform models have been employed over the years. However, most of these have yielded disappointing results (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). An exception to this trend is the Talent Development High School (TDHS) which has served as a model for larger high schools experiencing issues with below-average attendance, poor academic performance, and high dropout rates. The model created at Johns Hopkins University requires schools to be reorganized into smaller learning communities featuring a rigorous curriculum designed to help students participate in advanced English and math courses. The model also utilizes measures aimed at improving parent and community involvement. TDHS is currently being implemented in approximately forty three districts across fifteen states throughout the country (Center for Social Education of Schools, 2008). School districts spend on the average of

an additional \$350 per student each year in the TDHS model (Institute of Education Sciences, 2008).

A study of ninth grade TDHS students in Philadelphia revealed that 68% of the cohort was promoted to grade ten while only 60% of non TDHS students were promoted (Kemple et al., 2005). Positive results like this indicate that the TDHS model has been successful in preventing dropouts while other restructuring models have not. Caution must be exercised when considering the results as they were generated from a quasi-experimental design.

6. Other Noteworthy Programs

Other programs exist that seek to reduce dropouts while simultaneously increasing graduation rates. The Valued Youth Program was implemented in 108 schools in twenty four cities in the United States and Brazil from 2002-2003 (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The Teen Outreach Program also helped 13,000 at-risk students in sixteen states from 2001-2001 (Lehr, 2004). However, these programs have not been evaluated in detail, and even with their tremendous popularity, their effectiveness in decreasing dropout rates remains unconfirmed.

One program which has been evaluated at great length is the Quantum Opportunities Program. This program provides comprehensive services to at-risk students beginning in the ninth grade. Students are eligible to participate in the program for up to five years with services provided to the student even if he chooses to drop out of school (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). In the majority of participating cities, costs incurred ranged from \$22,000 to \$28,000 dollars per student over the five-year period of time. Even with the considerably high costs associated with the program, evaluations do not provide evidence that the participants completed school with any higher rate of success when compared to non-participants (Institute of Education Sciences,

2008). This specific situation indicates that school districts cannot randomly apply a program because of its popularity or convenience (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009).

In order to discourage students from dropping out of school, several states have passed punitive laws including revocation of the student's driver's license or work permit. According to Tyler and Lofstrom (2009), there are twenty seven states which have enacted legislation tied to driving privileges and regular school attendance. Other states place more emphasis on different variables in the learning process like satisfactory academic progress and discipline. Based on provisions in the state of Indiana, drivers' licenses and learners' permits are not issued to students below the age of eighteen who are habitually truant, have been suspended from school at least two times, have been expelled from school, or have chosen to drop out of school (Rumberger, 1987).

Some states have established assistance programs which offer financial stipends in supporting teenage parents who want to graduate from high school. These programs offer conditional support based on the student satisfying expectations with regards to attendance and academic progress (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The United States Department of Education's WWC suggested that financial incentives applied to at-risk students had a favorable impact on keeping students in school and on schedule to graduate (Moore & Waite, 1977).

Mentoring/Monitoring programs help students establish productive relationships with teachers at the school and with positive role models in the community. Students who have been identified as at-risk for dropping out of school are partnered with counselors, teachers, and administrators who meet with the student on a regular basis in an effort to establish a rapport with the student. It is the mentor's responsibility to help the student find value and meaning in work at school as well as assisting the student in establishing a connection within the school

environment (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). The mentor is also charged with assessing the student's progress at school. The Check and Connect Model is an excellent example of Mentoring/Monitoring programs and is recognized based on a component that focuses on the relationship between students and parents (Hotz, McElroy, & Sander, 2005). The WWC established that the Check and Connect Program had favorable effects in ensuring that participating students remained authentically engaged in the learning process throughout their tenure in high school (Fletcher & Wolfe, 2008). Mentoring/Monitoring programs can be implemented on both a small or large-scale basis.

The Coca-Cola Youth Program is an example of a mentoring program. Rather than partner at-risk students with teachers at the school, the program encourages the at-risk population to connect with tutors assigned to the school. The program appeared initially in the school districts in San Antonio, Texas. However, the program has grown and is now being employed by school districts throughout the country (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). A primary focus of the program is that all students can learn and that all students have value. Mentors encourage their mentees that they are worthy of second chances. Researchers have found that students in the program have lower dropout rates than those students not involved in the initiative (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).

The Common Goal Initiative in Indiana was implemented in eleven school districts throughout the state for the purpose of increasing graduation rates. A graduation rate of 80% was targeted, and attainment of the goal would occur by 2011. The majority of participating schools had graduation rates lower than 70% (University of Minnesota, 2008). The initiative was mentor-based and focused on one-to-one support for at-risk students. Credit recovery was another important component of the initiative as well as securing social services resources when

circumstances deemed it necessary. Funding for the initiative was generated through local businesses and organizations, including the Pacers Foundation (McNeal, 1997). This approach to increasing graduation rates achieved tremendous gains. It also saw huge increases in student participation in school activities.

As discussed earlier in this review, the majority of students who dropped out of school indicated the main reason for doing so was based upon a lack of academic success in the classroom and a sense of feeling overwhelmed in their attempt to recover lost credits. Bottoms and Anthony (2005) established that in working with struggling students, successful high schools were able to implement opportunities for remediation as well as credit recovery. Attempts to remediate and recover credit maintain the normal accepted standard and the process is transparent to ensure fidelity (Bottoms & Anthony, 2005). At-risk students are identified, encouraged to participate in the programs, and hopefully graduate on time with their cohort (Bottoms & Anthony, 2005). As noted previously, high school freshmen have a higher rate of dropping out of school when they do not have a successful transition to high school from middle school and when they experience academic difficulty early on during their high school tenure (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). To combat these issues, high schools have introduced the concept of period extensions or double dosing in English and math, thereby, exposing at-risk students to additional time on the taught curriculum (Bottoms & Anthony, 2005). Targeted students typically spend more time on English and math and less time on elective courses. Utilizing this format is geared toward helping at-risk students catch up with their classmates in academic growth and proficiency (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Schools use various methods such as common, formative assessments and teacher recommendations to determine which students should participate in the opportunity.

High schools throughout the country have secured funding to finance intervention programs not just for their at-risk population but for their entire freshman cohort. According to the SREB, freshman or ninth grade Academies have been created in many of the nation's most successful high schools when considering reducing dropouts and increasing graduation rates (Bottoms & Anthony, 2005). This concept when employed ensures that freshmen will be partnered with the same teachers throughout the school year in the attempt to foster supporting relationships between students and their teachers. Bottoms and Anthony (2005) discuss the concept of in-school academies that have also been utilized in schools with a large Spanish-speaking population. In this example, English as a Second Language (ESL) students receive additional instruction in English as well as Algebra. Data generated from the initiative indicates that failures in Algebra decreased by 22% based on student immersion into the English and Algebra curriculums (Bottoms & Anthony, 2005). This particular model has shown tremendous potential in reducing dropouts and increasing graduation rates.

Career academies have been in existence since 1969 (Lehr, 2004). Currently, the National Center on Secondary Education and Transition (NCSET) estimates that there are between 2,000 and 3,000 career academies in existence in the United States. A major component of this program is the reduction of class size with an emphasis on academic and technical features within a specific career focus. The program focuses on a progression of classes for cohort members as well as field experience opportunities, educational field trips, and guest speakers (Lehr, 2004). Participating students are exposed to real-world resources throughout the endeavor (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). The WWC has established that career academies are successful in helping prevent dropouts and also aid and assist students in progressing through curricular, co-curricular, and extracurricular activities (What Works Clearinghouse, 2007).

However, in a study by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation (MDRC), it was determined that career academies help students increase future earnings but do not prevent school dropouts nor improve upon the academic performance of participating students (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). The conflicting results from the observations imply the need for additional studies on this particular subject matter in an effort to provide more reliable results.

The Achievement for Latinos through Academic Success (ALAS) is another program aimed at improving graduation rates among high-risk students, in this specific case among Latino students (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). First introduced by the United States Department of Education in 1990, the focus of the program addressed problem solving, counseling, and creating relationships between students and their mentors. In an effort to promote collegiality, participating students progress through the continuum of classes as a cohort (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Effective communication among students, teachers, and parents is considered to be imperative in ensuring the students' success. The WWC argued that the program presented favorable results, including students remaining in school and staying engaged in the learning process (What Works Clearinghouse, 2007). The NCSET observed that students participating in the program had fewer absences, less failures, and accumulated more course credits as compared to those who were not participating in the program (Lehr, 2004).

Programs designed to help at-risk students are important in the overall effort in reducing dropout rates. However, other considerations should be recognized such as the climate and culture within a school as well as authentic engagement in the curriculum. Schools cannot make strides in improving their graduation rates without focusing on relevant relationships with their at-risk population. In 2006, lawmakers in Indiana enacted legislation for the purpose of reducing dropout rates in the state. Several bills including the House Enrolled Act 1347-2006, created a

framework where annual reviews of student career plans were required for each student. In addition to this provision, school counselors were directed to meet with each student on an annual basis to assess academic progress and discuss what the student would do after completing high school (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Lawmakers believed this approach would help school personnel emphasize the value of a high school diploma and the potential impact it had on the graduate's future. The legislation created a framework where students and their mentors would meet above and beyond the typical classroom interaction, thus, creating the potential for additional nurturing and sustaining relationships within the school. Another provision under the bill was the creation of the Double-Up for College initiative which allowed students greater access to Advanced Placement courses and allowed students the opportunity for dual enrollment in specific classes (American Youth Policy Reform, 2008).

This initiative ensured that high school students would be able to experience rigorous, college-level work and also earn college credits while still in high school. At-risk students enrolled in Double-Up for College were eligible for a tuition waiver, ensuring that limited personal finances would not prevent them from participating in the initiative. Other public laws in the state of Indiana have set out to eliminate the provisions for a general diploma and have adopted the Core 40 curriculum which now serves as the minimum college admission requirement for the state's four-year public universities (Zapf, Spradlin, & Plucker, 2006).

A report, *The Silent Epidemic*, addresses the dropout issue from the perspective of those students who have dropped out of school. According to information in the publication, smaller class sizes, collaborative learning experiences with peers, and the opportunity to build relationships with teachers were viewed as effective strategies in combating the dropout issue (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison 2006). The High School Survey of Student Achievement

(HSSSE) is a comprehensive survey which targets the components of student engagement and school climate in reconciling the dropout issue. Yearly reports from the HSSSE indicate common findings in that at-risk students are often more excited about learning when it is interactive and involves their peers (Yazzie-Mintz, 2007). Participating students acknowledged that activities including debates, discussions, presentations, projects, and role-playing were more meaningful and effective than traditional lectures. In fact, students considered the lecture approach for transferring knowledge as highly ineffective. Yet this style of teaching dominates public school classrooms in America (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Accepting perceptions of this nature from students is an important step in preventing dropouts and promoting satisfactory academic progress.

The Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. The foundation is guided by the affirming principle that every life has equal value. Based on research as well as input from students themselves, a goal of the foundation is to create a model for high schools that is less traditional and more collaborative (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Schools operating under the guidance of the foundation emphasize project-based activities to enhance the learning process. Another model of education reform that utilizes project-based learning is the New Tech High School model. Schools created from this framework are highly interactive in the daily learning process. Schools are established as an independent learning community and do not resemble traditional public schools with regards to scheduling, teaching, and learning. Typically, this type of school often resembles a business, with offices constructed for work. Computers are available for each student with their assignments being more project-based and often completed in a collaborative effort. Traditional textbooks are not a necessary component of the learning process, and teachers serve as facilitators as students search for

answers in their efforts to complete the projects (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). Students are responsible for their own learning in this model. Due to the fact that project-based learning is so popular among students and parents, often a lottery system is employed to populate the school with consideration given to at-risk students as well. Current data indicates that graduation rates for schools using the New Tech High School model are higher than those schools not using the model and that students graduating from this model of high school are more likely to attend and graduate from college (Stanley & Plucker, 2008) providing evidence that transitioning to this type of learning can be done with ease and success (New Tech High School, 2008).

The First Things First Model (FTFM) was developed in Kansas City, Kansas, and has been implemented in over seventy schools throughout nine districts in the country. This model of educational reform addresses the three R's of academic success rigor, relevance, and relationships (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). In its efforts to increase student academic performance, consideration is afforded the following elements curriculum alignment among national, state, and local levels; implementation of the family advocate system which partners at-risk students with a faculty mentor; and utilization of the School Within a School concept by creating smaller learning communities (Zapf et al., 2006). Several reviews on the model indicate significant improvements in the areas of academic achievement, attendance, and graduation rates for participating students (Zapf et al., 2006). However, a few of the reviews were unable to report the same favorable findings, indicating that additional studies should be facilitated to determine reliability and applicability.

Many of the guiding principles associated with rigor, relevance, and relationships can be found in the Five Promises for Success of the America's Promise Alliance (APA). The concept for the Alliance was initiated by Founding Chairman General Colin Powell and was generated

out of President Bill Clinton's Summit for America's Future. The organization seeks to improve learning opportunities for over 15 million at-risk students as well as help achieve a national graduation rate of 90% by 2020 (Stanley & Plucker, 2008). The Alliance stresses specific elements that have been identified as being crucial in the overall success of at-risk students as caring adults, safe places, healthy starts, an effective education, and the opportunity to serve others (America's Promise Alliance, 2008.). Part of the APA goal is to ensure cooperation, develop research centers, and encourage policymakers at all levels to be more supportive of at-risk youths. In seeking to attain these objectives, the APA has conducted summits throughout the nation as a tool to promote awareness of the issues that prevent students from learning and graduating from high school. Summits are viewed as inter-agency collaborations where all stakeholders are united in the collective effort to recover at-risk students and improve graduation rates at all levels.

The Ninth Grade Success Academy was established to serve as a smaller learning community within the Talent Development High School Model (TDHSM). The Academy's goal was to help at-risk students with insufficient grades graduate from high school on time (Herlihy & Quint, 2006). Strategies to help students within this model focused on a daily schedule with more flexibility afforded to start and end times for students and a more relevant curriculum consisting of additional Career and Technical Education courses. Schools typically employ block schedules consisting of four ninety-minute blocks rather than a traditional schedule made up of seven fifty-minute periods. This schedule affords students the opportunity to earn more credits during their high school experience. The TDHSM gives building administrators more flexibility in scheduling opportunities for remediation and acceleration during the day, semester, and school year. Efforts like this often have a positive impact on student learning (Herlihy &

Quint, 2006). Consistent with the TDHSM is the expectation that all coursework is rigorous and prepares students for the college experience. Results indicate that 25% more students participating in the TDHSM earned more credits toward graduation compared to those students in non-TDHSM schools (Herlihy & Quint, 2006). Critics of TDHSM indicate that students earned more credits because they were enrolled in more classes during their high school tenure. Other critics indicate that additional seat time in the classroom does not always yield increased growth or proficiency. According to Herlihy and Quint (2006), schools that implemented the First Things First Model (FTFM) of class extensions experienced significant growth in English and math scores. However, few districts have adopted the model, and more importantly, second generation FTFM schools have not observed overall improvements on school achievement. The model lacks a clear and implementable plan on dealing with at-risk students and diploma attainment. While the TDHSM led to better tenth grade promotion rates, students in the ninth grade who were not successful usually decided to drop out of school. The possible implication exists that alternative methods of instruction are necessary when working with at-risk students who have been previously retained.

Although improvements in the TDHSM are encouraging, the data generated from these experiences must be assessed with accuracy. Low-performing schools under the TDHSM must continue to improve as their students prepare for high school graduation, college, and employment (Herlihy & Quint, 2006). Consistent throughout TDHSM schools was the problem with ninth grade compulsory attendance. An increased percentage of ninth graders were absent for at least forty days during the school year and led to approximately one-third of the entire cohort not satisfying the attendance requirement to be promoted to the tenth grade. The retention also had a tremendous impact on the student's ability to graduate with their cohort in four years.

Teachers working at schools with a larger than normal at-risk population are typically inexperienced and considered to be novice teachers (Jerald, 2002). In many cases, professional development is employed as a tool to increase the teacher's capacity as the instructional leader in the classroom. Limited data exists regarding specific professional development that has the ability to have a positive impact on the novice teacher (Herlihy & Quint, 2006). There are few reliable reports which indicate that a well-established curriculum, training on the curriculum, curriculum alignment, and departmental support for new teachers is advantageous in promoting teacher growth. It is believed that as a teacher is exposed to quality professional development, student achievement tends to increase.

A highly structured learning environment will also improve student achievement as well as improve graduation rates for at-risk students. Adjustments to the daily schedule that reduce the impersonality of larger high schools improve the culture and climate within a school, creating an atmosphere where students are comfortable with learning and in a position to be successful. These alterations often include the provision for an advisory or homeroom period as well as the creation of smaller learning communities where students share the same core-area instructors, ensuring that students are partnered with teachers who know the students well (Jerald, 2002). Students attending FTFM schools acknowledged the importance of their advisors for the following reasons adults in this role offered guidance throughout the learning process, encouraged students through periods of difficulty, and helped students celebrate successes with each accomplishment (Herlihy & Quint, 2006). However, there are challenges with implementing such an organized approach within such an intimate school setting. It is difficult to schedule students in smaller learning communities particularly if the goal is to ensure students are partnered with the same teachers throughout all four years of high school. Students in their

third and fourth years may have to participate in classes outside their learning community due to interest as well as capacity which could cause issues with manageability and coordination (Herlihy & Quint, 2006). Creating smaller learning communities does not guarantee increased student achievement, and additional studies should be completed to determine more conclusive results.

Those students considered to be at-risk of not graduating from high school include but are not limited to low socioeconomic students, students from ethnic minorities, and students with disabilities. The Individuals with Disabilities Improvement Education Act of 2004 requires that students with disabilities be served within what is considered to be a reasonable educational setting. In effect, all teachers along the K-12 continuum are required to have the necessary tools and resources to address the educational needs of all students, including those with emotional, cognitive, and physical disabilities. The Comprehensive School Reform Quality (CSRQ) Center, which serves as an assistance center under the Department of Education's Special Education Programs, has provided recommendations to case managers regarding how students with special needs can thrive under school reform initiatives (Herlihy & Quint, 2006). Based upon findings within the report, those initiatives that have a positive impact on at-risk students include organization and governance of curriculum and classroom instruction, flexible scheduling, grouping of students into small learning communities, routine monitoring of student progress, family involvement, and technical assistance (Herlihy & Quint, 2006). The report also suggests other factors which contribute to the success of students with disabilities ownership of special education personnel before expectation contracts are discussed and agreed upon, and recognizing the importance of simple and clear instructions in the daily success of students (Herlihy & Quint, 2006). This will include instructions covering the basic needs of students, cooperative learning

opportunities, and adaptive teaching strategies. The exceptional children's teacher should be supported with training and professional development as well as instructed in the use of graphic organizers, mnemonics and mnemonic devices, differentiated instruction, and computer-assisted learning for students. Flexible grouping based on interest may also promote high expectations among students. For at-risk students, technology is very important as it affords access to several non-traditional learning opportunities. Schools with a larger than normal at-risk population should invest time in studying models that can help improve the education for at-risk students. Policies need to be adopted that establish acceptable parameters for assistive technology.

Summary

The programs discussed above indicate many of the different, alternative educational options to help at-risk students graduate from high school. These programs for the most part focus on working with students, addressing their problems, and developing strategies and activities based upon their individual strengths and weaknesses. At-risk students are those which belong to the low-income population, those with intellectual or other disabilities, and those belonging to ethnic minority groups. The programs discussed in this effort seek to address these issues. In general, many of these programs have been successful in reducing high school dropouts and improving graduation rates; however, more studies are needed in order to determine their reliability. Nevertheless, they present promising strategies for keeping at-risk students in school and on track to graduate with their peers as well as preparing them for life beyond high school including entry into college or trade schools.

CHAPTER 3: METHODS EMPLOYED TO ADDRESS THE PROBLEM OF PRACTICE

Introduction

Chapter three will describe the qualitative method that will be used to collect, analyze, and synthesize data generated during the inquiry. The data considered in this Critical Incident Case Study (Flanagan, 1954) will be generated from surveys and a focus group with principals, graduation coaches, and Student Services personnel in the Johnston County Schools concerning information pertinent to improving graduation rates within the school district. This technique allows the researcher to collect data, through interviews, describing the impact of the critical incident as perceived by those involved in the critical incident. Relevant to this student, Chell (1998) modified the Critical Incident Case Study to allow it to be used as a research tool to reflect and to provide perspective in the incident. Specifically, this Critical Incident Case Study will examine responses from surveys and a focus group concerning views on strategies to improve graduation rates within the district. During the tenure of the previous superintendent, a directive was instituted and strategies implemented to improve the graduation rates of students within their four year cohort window. This incident set into motion a set of strategies which were implemented, but not studied for the improvement of the district's graduation rate.

In CIT: Analysis of Adaptations, Chell (1998) outlines eight distinguishable aspects of the methods: (1) preliminary design work and determination of the sample, (2) gaining access, (3) introducing the CIP method and getting the interview underway, (4) focusing the theme and giving an account of oneself as a researcher to the respondents, (5) controlling the interview, by probing the incidents and clarifying one's understanding, (6) concluding the interview, (7) taking care of ethical issues, and (8) analyzing the data (Chell, 1998, p. 56). The ability to use this

method to analyze overall respondent reported themes provided data supporting the effectiveness of graduation improvement strategies, and the development of a comprehensive plan. This method further assisted the researcher as data was utilized during the focus groups.

The use of qualitative research is a comprehensive exploration of a problem based on analysis of information provided by participants in their natural location (Creswell, 2005). According to Merriam (2002) qualitative research designs have gained national attention over the last two decades and are especially beneficial in the absence of a specific premise to explain an extraordinary situation such as students not graduating from high school.

An exploration of an effective rural graduation plan based solely upon the feedback from principals is quite limited in the literature. More attention needs to be devoted to studies on dropouts and recovery programs created to assist them in completing graduation requirements (Groth, 1998). With a mandate from the President of the United States to improve graduation rates, a qualitative case study to obtain a panoramic view and detailed description of a single rural district's plan to solve its graduation rate problem is highly relevant. A qualitative case study is a richly concentrated investigation of a single organization, person, or group (Merriam, 2002). This methodological design allows the investigator to focus solely upon a particular entity to obtain an in-depth understanding of a phenomenon based on triangulation of information (Creswell, 2005). In order to qualify as a qualitative case study, there must be an exhaustive examination of a particular institution or unit (Merriam, 2002) to enable the investigator to determine the effectiveness of a specific program. In contrast to quantitative designs which utilize numbers or data to test hypotheses, qualitative designs draw upon the essences and shared experiences of people to understand a concern (Merriam, 2002).

A case study methodology is used to collect information related to the complexity of a specific issue which has a unique and special interest of the investigator (Stake, 1994). Yin (1994) presented at least four applications for a case study model;

1. To explain complex causal links in real-life interventions
2. To describe the real-life context in which the intervention has occurred
3. To describe the intervention itself
4. To explore those situations in which the interventions being evaluated has no clear set of outcomes.

This study will include administrative stakeholders in the process of creating an institutional “blueprint” which can be used to improve the four year graduation cohort rate at a level that exceeds 90%. In following the case study method it is expected that the final product will be institutionally sound, defensible, and readily applicable to the several diverse high schools in the Johnston County School System.

Case study research excels at bringing the participants to an understanding of a complex issue or object and can extend experience or add strength to what is already known through previous research (Bronwyn, Dawson, Devine, Hannum, Hill, Leydens, Matuskevich, Traver, & Palmquist, 1994-2012). With regards to improving graduation rates, the case study method is optimal in exploring the unique perspective of principals who have first-hand knowledge of the problem as well as successful strategies to address the problem. In order to develop a successful and implementable graduation plan, it is of the utmost importance to listen to principals within the district to hear their stories and experiences in the effort to gain insight to the strategies that work and do not work in graduating more students. Input from principals and other stakeholders is critical in understanding the components of an effective graduation plan as they are able to

make sense of the problem and provide knowledge and genuine insight to understand why some students do not graduate from high school with their cohort.

Despite the fact that researchers (Curley, 1991; Fernandez & Shu, 1988; Franse & Siegel, 1987; Hargroves, 1986; Hoyle & Collier, 2006; Montacel, Cortez, & Cortez, 2004; Patterson, Beltyukova, & Berman, 2007) in several studies have utilized qualitative research methodologies to explore dropouts and graduation rates, none demonstrated a qualitative critical instance case study to analyze a rural district's graduation plan. They enumerated (a) risk factors characteristically associated with dropouts; (b) inadequate strategies typically employed by recovery programs to keep students in school; (c) recommendations to reduce freshmen failures; and (d) effective interventions to improve urban schools. Moreover, these studies lacked information derived from the essences and experiences of principals, graduation coaches, and student services personnel responsible for improving graduation rates. As such, there was no qualitative critical instance case study to demonstrate the success of a large rural district's efforts in developing an effective and implementable graduation plan.

Focusing on feedback from principals and other educators working in a single administrative unit may offer valuable insight to rural school leaders in developing and redesigning programs aimed at improving graduation rates. As this study explores the graduation crisis, it will bring to light the successfulness of a rural district's efforts to improve its graduation rate through the analysis of stakeholder's responses to survey questions.

In the same way, this inquiry will employ a Critical Incident Case Study as the tool to obtain feedback from principals (and others) themselves to add to the research in understanding how to better improve graduation rates to 90%. It will present stakeholders' suggestions of what it would take to help students stay in school and graduate with their four-year cohort. This study

will add to the literature by presenting stakeholders' personal beliefs and perceptions of an effective rural graduation improvement plan. To determine stakeholder's beliefs and perceptions, the investigator will invest significant time in exploring the following study questions. In identifying a theoretical perspective, it was determined that this study will utilize organizational theories that focus on bureaucracies, institutions, organizational structure and functions, or excellence in organizational performance.

Trochim (2000) stated that the study design is thought of as the structure of the study project. It is the physical substance that holds the project together and allows one to show how all the major parts of the study including participants, treatments, measures, and methods of assessment work together to address the study questions. Huck, Cormier, and Bounds (1974) stated that the purpose of the study design is to establish the basis for tests of statistical significance. Thus, the study design serves two purposes; first, to assist the investigator in an answering of the study questions and secondly, to control for variables that might affect the cause-effect relationship. Based on the nature of this study, it was determined that a critical instance case study design was the most appropriate design for completing this study.

This study on the current understanding and knowledge base of administrative stakeholders related to the development of a graduation plan for high school students began in the spring of 2014 and will continue through the entire 2014-2015 school year. Administrative stakeholders, including principals from elementary, middle, and high schools will participate in the process, as well as selected central services personnel and high school graduation coaches. The following major activities will have taken place prior to the final presentation of a Johnston County Schools' Graduation Plan.

1. A thorough analysis of all Johnston County Schools' policies and procedures related to graduation requirements of students in the system will be conducted. Since there is no current graduation plan, the researcher will be able to review information from each high school principal to determine compare and contrast similarities and differences based on the actual respective high school graduation data that has been reported to the North Carolina Department of Public Instruction.
2. The researcher will involve all principals in a process that involves current disparate practices between the schools, and collect information that was useful in creating the graduation plan. The initial step of bringing together all stakeholders will be vital in the institutional process that will be expected in the end. The group's collective recommendations will be analyzed and synthesized into a draft document for review by a sample group of principals prior to sharing the document with the entire group.
3. The researcher will employ multiple means of data collection including field documentation, surveys, and a focus group to provide the researcher with ample information to determine emerging trends and practices. The researcher will use this information to sort the responses into individual responses to help improve student graduation rates (i.e. policies, advising, tutoring, differentiation, and program application).
4. All principals and other participants will have the opportunity to participate in the process, and examine the data and expectations. Additionally, they will have the opportunity to provide clarity to all programmatic responses and created documents.

Although a tremendous amount of work has occurred within the district over the last several years to improve graduation rates, there remains much work to be done before the

problem of low graduation rates has been eradicated. Therefore, Johnston County Schools needs to focus on raising its four-year cohort graduation rate by constructing a graduation improvement plan.

Study Questions

Four study questions will be considered in this investigation. They are:

1. What are the key elements of a graduation plan and how can they be consistently implemented in each of the schools in Johnston County?
2. What impact if any, has the High Five initiative had on the graduation rate for students who attend the Johnston County School System?
3. What impact if any, has the High Five initiative had on the cohort graduation rate of students in Johnston County with regards to ethnicity and gender?
4. Are there specific groups of students who should receive enhanced programming and services to keep them on track to graduate with their cohort group?

Instrumentation

As the researcher, questions will be generated to populate the survey. Questions selected for the survey will be connected to the four study questions discussed earlier in this chapter. The eleven survey questions emerged from a review of relevant, existing literature regarding improvement of dropout rate, as well as information surrounding impacts of the Triangle High Five Initiative. These eleven questions will also be used to further engage participants in a voluntary focus group where conversational dialogue can be synthesized into thematic occurrences as noted during the focus group interview session.

The investigator will utilize a free tool from Google, Google Forms, to create the survey to be utilized for collecting data. Once the survey has been approved, it will be completed by all

principals in the district, as well as the eight high school graduation coaches and two Student Services personnel who work directly with dropouts and graduation rates. Data generated from the survey will be transferred into *NVivo*, software developed for the purpose of disaggregating information that has been produced through qualitative research. The software will allow the investigator to collect, organize and analyze content from interviews, focus group discussions, and surveys. A thorough analysis of the data will ensue with scrutiny placed on emerging trends that will help formulate a graduation plan for the district.

Participants

Case studies may use one participant, or a small group of participants. However, it is important that the participant pool remain relatively small (Bronwyn et al., 1994-2012). For this effort, the district's 44 principals will participate in the Critical Incident Case Study by completing a survey asking them to identify "best practices" within the district in recognizing strategies to help improve the district's overall four-year cohort graduation rate. Other study participants will include the district's eight high school graduation coaches and two Student Services personnel that work directly with graduation rates for a total of 54 participants. Each of the participants will receive the anonymous survey through the use of Google forms. Further, respondents will be provided an opportunity to participate in a focus group to examine thematic occurrences which occur during the focus group. This utilization of the focus group will enable the researchers to further clarify the responses from the survey. Participants selected include all K-12 principals in the district to provide information into the best practice strategies at all levels. In addition, those participants whose job description directly impact graduation rates will be included to further impact best practice strategies and the construction of a graduation improvement plan.

All participants in the study are employed by Johnston County Schools which has a total of 3,739 full time employees with 2,238 of those being classroom teachers. There are 304 National Board Certified teachers working in the district. The district has a total of 45 schools which are arranged into the following categories: 22 elementary schools, 11 middle schools, 10 high schools, and two alternative schools.

There are approximately 33,341 students enrolled in the district's 44 schools. Total enrollment is broken down into 15,790 elementary school students, 8,511 middle school students, and 9,040 high school students. The district serves students from 47 different countries with more than 45 distinct native languages spoken by students in the district. In addition to English, the top five spoken languages are: Spanish, Arabic, Chinese, Vietnamese, and Russian.

The district transports 22,451 students by school bus each day and utilizes 269 buses on a multi-tiered travel system, with buses and drivers being shared among elementary, middle, and high schools. The buses consume over 3,405 gallons of fuel and travel approximately 23,032 miles each day. The school lunch program in the district serves 27,456 meals on a daily basis. The total number of meals served during the previous school year was 4,958,280 and the average sanitation grade for each cafeteria was 99.6%.

Summary

In the United States and North Carolina, school districts, society as a whole, and government agencies continue to search for strategies to improve graduation rates. The purpose of this study is to construct a graduation improvement plan for all the Johnston County Schools that will improve the district's four-year cohort graduation rate to 90%. This topic is pertinent based on the fact that in times of economic duress, many programs created for the sole purpose of improving graduation rates, are being reevaluated and eliminated. Leaders and decision

makers need to be highly informed about the overall effectiveness of programs and strategies as they seek to improve graduation rates in Johnston County.

This qualitative effort utilizes Critical Incident Case Study methodology to describe how stakeholders perceive the most effective strategies in improving graduation rates at their school and how likely these strategies can be utilized in a district-wide graduation plan. The researcher will present the rationale for selecting this method of inquiry and provide a discussion to inform the reader of the qualities needed to be a successful qualitative investigator. Case study methodology will be examined followed by what will be seen as strengths of the Critical Incident Case Study. Data collection procedures will be discussed and the method used to analyze data will be explained.

CHAPTER 4: RESULTS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The justification for this case study sought to add to the limited body of knowledge currently available in the literature to promote effective graduation improvement rates in efforts to assist educators to meet the federal mandate of increasing graduation rates to 90% by 2020. More than ever before, public schools are under scrutiny to increase graduation rates while decreasing the rate of dropouts. The purpose of this chapter will discuss in detail the results of the data analysis used to examine best practices within the Johnston County school district to improve graduation rates to 90% or higher.

In order to effectively add to the knowledge and understanding of the graduation rate problem in the public schools, it is vital to survey current school leader practitioners. National, state, and local graduation rates have been topics of concern for the government, school officials, and society as a whole. Many students throughout the nation and in the state of North Carolina are not graduating from high school in the traditional four-year period. As a result, the students' likelihood of committing crime, becoming incarcerated, living in poverty, and lacking skills for sustained employment increases (Lochner & Moretti, 2004).

Through this study, the researcher sought to identify programs and strategies that will assist students to be successful in school and graduate with their four-year cohort. Knowing the available literature on effective strategies for improving graduation rates in large, rural districts is limited; this researcher relied largely upon the participant's responses to the Graduation Improvement Plan (GIP) survey to construct the proposed graduation improvement plan for the district. These occurrences are reflective of a quantitative representation of how often identified themes occur during the participant surveys. Personal educational experiences and interview findings provided qualitative data to support the findings.

This chapter will present the analysis of data generated from the four research questions, implications of this analysis for principals; and list recommendations for future research. Few empirical studies have attempted to examine practitioner responses when identifying effective strategies to improve graduation rates. This study explored feedback provided by school leaders within the district regarding strategies to improve the four-year graduation cohort rate to 90% for Johnston County Schools, and results of the analysis are provided in the following sections.

Data Overview

Fifty-four school administrators within the district, including all forty-four principals, eight graduation coaches, and two Student Services personnel were given the opportunity to participate in the Graduation Improvement Plan (GIP) Survey. The anonymous, optional survey was conducted using Google Forms and deployed via electronic mail to all fifty-four participants included in the Critical Incident Case Study. The survey was deployed with information regarding the purpose and description of the study. Further, a focus group was conducted with voluntary participation of respondents in an effort to provide additional clarification and qualitative data to the study. The unit of analysis was the individual responses from each survey respondent. The survey participants were asked to answer eleven questions associated with a specific aspect in relation to students graduating with their four-year cohort group. A total of 23 respondents participated in the study, with all 23 voluntarily participating in the focus group. Of the 23 participants, 14 principals, 7 graduation coaches, and 2 student services district personnel participated in the focus group. Based on the responses offered by the participants, emerging trends related to the four research questions presented themselves to the researcher and are grouped according to their thematic occurrence. In addition, triangulation strengthens a study by using multiple methods or various types of data (Patton, 2002, p. 247). Additionally Patton adds,

“knowing a single landmark only locates you somewhere along the line in a direction from the landmark, whereas with two landmarks (and your own position being the third point of the triangle) you can take the bearings in two directions and locate yourself at their intersection (as cited in 2002, p. 247).” Recognizing the importance of validating the research presented in this study, I have extracted important and saturated findings produced from interviews, as well as, presented essential thematic occurrence tables to support the recommendations made later in the chapter. These occurrences are reflective of a quantitative representation of how often identified themes occur during the participant surveys. Personal educational experiences and interview findings provided qualitative data to support the findings. In addition to designating a percentage to each occurrence, a corresponding comment from a participant is included in the tables to add validity to the data. Each survey question is found under the appropriate and matching research question.

The GIP survey was created using a free tool from Google, Google Forms. The information generated from the survey responses was transferred into *NVivo*, a software program developed for the purpose of disaggregating information produced through qualitative research. The software allowed the investigator to collect, organize and analyze content from interviews, focus group discussions, and surveys. After a thorough analysis of the data, survey results were sorted into four major categories: data application, student and staff learning, community involvement, and climate and culture. These emerging trends gathered supported the framework and formulation of the proposed GIP for Johnston County Schools. Recommendations are provided based upon data from the GIP survey, as well as results from the principal focus group and interviews.

Evaluation Model

The qualitative study utilizes Critical Incident Case Study methodology to describe how stake holders perceive the most effective strategies in improving graduation rates at their school and how likely these strategies can be utilized in a district-wide graduation plan. A list of questions will be generated to populate the survey. Questions selected for the survey will be connected to the four study questions discussed earlier in this chapter. For this effort, the district's 44 principals will participate in the Critical Incident Case Study by completing a survey asking them to identify "best practices" within the district in recognizing strategies to help improve the district's overall four-year cohort graduation rate. Other study participants will include the district's eight high school graduation coaches and two Student Services personnel that work directly with graduation rates for a total of 54 participants.

Four areas including student and staff learning, community involvement, and climate and culture, and data analysis served as major subgroups when categorizing best practice strategies. The data analysis section will correlate to the four study questions.

1. What are the key elements of a graduation plan and how can they be consistently implemented in each of the schools in Johnston County?
2. What impact if any, has the High Five initiative had on the graduation rate for students who attend the Johnston County School System?
3. What impact if any, has the High Five initiative had on the cohort graduation rate of students in Johnston County with regards to ethnicity and gender?
4. Are there specific groups of students who should receive enhanced programming and services to keep them on track to graduate with their cohort group?

The results from this study conducted in the Johnston County Schools utilized the responses from the 23 participant principals and graduation coaches to construct a Graduation Improvement Plan consisting of best practices to help students graduate with their four-year cohort.

General Trends

Table 6 summarizes the general themes which emerged during the focus groups with respondents. This section of the study sought to encapsulate emerging trends captured within interview and focus group data for the purpose of identifying strategies to populate the GIP. General qualitative data was compiled in general, with data further compiled in conjunction with the four areas impacting the design of a GIP. For example, participant 21 stated, “I did not always recognize which students were in danger of not graduating on time in the student’s first year of high school”, while participant 6 voiced, “there should be better communication as students move from grade to grade and school to school, like from elementary to middle school.” In other words, both survey participants acknowledged the need for increased awareness of the individual student’s needs, as well as improved dialogue among school leaders. The comment from participant 6 “there should be better communication” suggests that principals in the district are not investing the necessary amount of time to build relationships with students and share that information as a student transitions to the next school in the next designated feeder pattern. Correspondingly, participant 21 expressed, “I did not always recognize which students were in danger of not graduating.” This statement conveyed acknowledged lack of knowledge in regards to which incoming freshmen could be assisted with additional resources supporting graduating within their four-year cohort. Moreover, participant 21 said, “some middle schools do a better

Table 6

General Trends

Theme	Thematic Occurrence					
	Increased Awareness	Relationship Building	Transition Process	Insufficient Time	Engagement	Limited Empathy
Number of Occurrences	32	41	29	21	16	39
Percentage of Occurrences	53%	68%	48%	35%	26%	65%

Note. Johnston County Schools Focus Group, 2015.

job than others in sharing information about students as they transition to our school.” There are implications of concern and dissatisfaction with the transition process involving at least one of the middle schools that feeds into the high school where this participant is assigned. A more telling sign is that the high school may not have fully embraced the importance of the transition process and allow others to dictate how the process will be facilitated. In comparison to these participants’ comments that emphasized distress from a lack of communication about sufficient knowledge of students, three other participants implied that there was not enough time to adequately discuss each student and their specific needs as they moved to the next school.

For instance, participant 5 reported that “closing out the school year is the busiest and most stressful time of the year. There simply is not enough time to get everything done. My blood pressure spikes during this time of the year and returns to normal as soon as the students and teachers have left for the summer.” This participant implied that with all the duties assigned to principals as managers and instructional leaders, there is not enough time at the end of the year to satisfy all the requirements of the position. The absence of sufficient time prevented him from talking with the sending principal about each student’s needs as the student was promoted to the next level of learning. Similarly, participant 11 stated that “we have to begin having conversations in the spring about our 5th graders because it is too late if you wait until May and June. For them to be successful in middle school, the receiving school needs to know who needs and does not need additional resources to make it happen.” Thus, these participants suggested that the end of the school year was too late to start the transition process and have dialogue about at-risk student needs. It appears to the researcher that the conversation of successfully moving students from school to school needs to begin earlier in the school year, possibly in March or April and involves more than scheduling an appointment to hand over cumulative folders in the

middle of June. Nonetheless, these participants indicated that a lack of time and poor communication were factors impacting students to not graduate with their four-year cohort.

Additionally, three participants added that they did a poor job in helping students graduate on time, especially if the student had previously dropped out of school. Participant 14 revealed that “once a student is labeled, more than likely, the student can’t outrun the label.” This participant described an atmosphere or climate where students are retained early in the learning process, or possibly even long-term suspended from school for a violation of the code of conduct. These circumstances appear to create conditions in which teachers, support staff, and administrators disregard or minimize the student with the perception of the student as a problem student. In other words, participant 14 expressed concern that too many educators were not empathetic in working with students who made poor choices earlier in school. Participant 17 confirmed this problem by stating that, “My staff did a great job in recovering dropouts, but did a poor job of re-engaging these students in the learning process and keeping them on track to receive a diploma.” This participant further disclosed that teachers at this school occasionally questioned leadership as to why some students who had previously caused problems in school and eventually left school, were encouraged to return to school so that they could cause more problems. This participant then stated, “...do we want these students walking the roads during the day when nobody is home? Or do we want them in school, engaged, on track to graduate with a skill to contribute to our community?” Equally troubling, participant 4 agreed with the majority of teachers at the school. Participant 4 stated, “...if a student does not want to be here for the right reasons, they’re wasting all of our time. If they don’t want to be here, we don’t want them here preventing others from learning.”

In essence, these three participants described their public school environment as having some empathy in recovering dropouts, but limited empathy in actively engaging the students upon their return to school in satisfying the requirements to graduate. It is the researcher's perception from analyzing survey responses and conducting small group breakout sessions with school level practitioners and participants in identifying strategies to improve the district's graduation rate, that some participants lacked the passion, energy, and drive to help students attain a diploma. For example, participant 14 mentioned, "...let me help you grow [focus on graduating from high school] or let me help you go [leave school without a diploma]." Likewise, participant 17 stated "...you have to basically choose what your main focus is going to be, and focus on it. Let the main thing, be the main thing. Are we about test scores or graduation rates?" In other words, these participants expressed to the researcher that they made a conscious decision to focus on other school- related issues rather than focusing on helping students attain their diploma.

Student and Staff Learning

Table 7 provides details regarding the numbers and percentages of thematic occurrences noted during the participant focus group. Another reason these school leaders indicated that students did not graduate from school with their cohort in the four-year window of time was due in part to the lack of guidance or direction from central services. Factually, the district has developed a culture of site-based management, but when considering the data generated from the survey, participants desired assistance from district level personnel in finding resources and utilizing strategies to aid and assist in the goal of helping students graduate in a timely manner. For instance, participant 9 reported, "it would be a tremendous help if someone [from central services] could research and determine what we need to be doing at the school level to keep

Table 7

Staff and Student Learning

Theme	Thematic Occurrence						
	Insufficient Guidance	PD for Teachers	Formative Observation	Clarity	Sacred Cows	Smaller Class Sizes	Credit Recovery Programs
Number of Occurrences	24	43	39	22	26	42	46
Percentages of Occurrences	40%	71%	65%	36%	43%	70%	76%

Note. Johnston County Schools Focus Group Data, 2015.

students engaged and on track to graduate.” Equally, participant 5 stated, “we want a systemic plan where everyone is doing the same thing based on proven strategies;” and participant 22 commented, “...with regards to relevant learning, we need to know the proven strategies that should be focused on in the classroom to place our teachers and students in a position to be equally successful.”

Another participant expressed that before help could genuinely be afforded the district’s students [as it pertains to graduating from school], much work needed to be done in the area of professional development for the district’s classroom teachers. Participant 19 advocated for this and stated, “...we need to know what strategies our teachers need to use every day in the classroom. What do we need to hang our hat on as a district in terms of impacting student achievement every minute of every day?” Participants 3, 11, and 20 were consistent in their desire to know more about visible learning. Participant 20 stated, “For us to provide the best education to our students...we have to redefine the role of teachers in every classroom. Visible learning and teaching takes place when our classroom teachers see authentic learning through the eyes of their students and help them [students] become their own teachers.”

Other participants communicated the desire to have a more structured approach when conducting formative observations of teachers. Participant 9 stated, “We all need to employ a series of formative evaluations that are non-threatening to our teachers. Formative evaluations are like a visit to the doctor’s office for a physical...they diagnose what needs to be fixed and offer strategies on how to accomplish the desired result.” Participant 1 added, “Why did the district stop using the classroom walk through system for formative observation? This type of feedback took time, but was tremendously beneficial in helping our teachers grow and improve.” Another participant added the belief that teachers needed more professional development to be

effective. "...the teachers we hire fresh out of college are more prepared than many of our veteran teachers. The idea of formative assessment is still threatening many of our most experienced teachers because of the perception of the principal and the role of evaluator. The researchers assert that teachers conduct formative assessments on one another and then use the data to improve instruction?" In other words these participants believe formative evaluation to be an effective strategy in improving classroom instruction. It was the researcher's perception that participants view formative assessment as a tool that could have a positive impact on the district's graduation rate.

Notable information from other participants recognized the need for teacher clarity when delivering relevant information to students. Clarity, as perceived by the researcher was twofold; clarity in knowledge of the information presented to the student for learning, and clarity in terms of communicating the information in the most effective manner to the learner. Still, other participants promoted the need for genuine relationships between educators [administrators, support personnel, and teachers] and all students in the school. One participant stated, "Students and their parents don't care how much we know...they are more concerned with knowing how much we care." Relationships were touted by participants as "...effective in helping some students make a connection within the learning environment and staying on schedule to graduate from school." Other participants recognized the importance of teacher advisors, school counselors, and athletic coaches in forming appropriate relationships with students. One participant added, "Many of our students come from non-traditional homes or worse, they are homeless and have no positive role model to emulate outside of school. They are starved for adult attention and we must respond as caring and compassionate adults."

Many participants communicated the need to take a strategic approach when working with graduation rates. The like-minded participants believed it necessary to identify any “sacred cows” within the district organization and eliminate them in an effort to empower site-based administrators and teachers in battling more important issues such as student achievement and graduation rates. “We need to purge other initiatives like [when we eliminated] the AIG (Academically and Intellectually Gifted) Center...” offered participant 3. Other participants questioned the relevance of homework, retentions, and year-round schools as obstacles when having dialogue about strategies to improve graduation rates. In essence, these participants described tools within the district that did not have a positive impact on student learning or help students achieve a diploma. It was the researcher’s perception from disaggregating the data and from conducting small-group interview sessions that these principals believed many practices within the district offered little or no help to students and should be replaced by more effective strategies.

Most participants suggested that smaller class sizes were a necessary component in increasing student learning as it pertains to graduating with the four-year cohort. For example, participant 9 expressed, “we build our master schedule around our core academic classes as well as the fact that we keep those classes smaller than others [electives] in an effort to provide a more intimate learning environment for students that need more resources to be academically successful.” Similarly, participant 17 said, “I know the research indicates otherwise, but as a practitioner, I see certain students benefit from smaller classes coupled with individualized instruction from their teachers.” Still, participant 14 responded, “I think reduced class size is even more beneficial for the teacher than for the student as the reduction in the number of students affords more time to the teacher in building relevant relationships with students. It’s all

about the relationships.” The participants agreed that smaller class sizes provided more caring teachers for students, as well as exposing the students to more differentiated instruction. According to these participants this would enable the students to experience more success in school and graduate with their cohort.

Others indicated the need for a flexible credit recovery program when discussing strategies to help students obtain a diploma. Several participants discussed a daily schedule that gives students time during an extended lunch period to study, complete makeup work, and explore additional academic interests. The purpose of this multi-faceted lunch period is to provide students additional opportunities to enrich their learning experience as well as receive extra academic assistance and support during the instructional school day. Participant 14 said, “We do the majority of our acceleration and remediation during our SMART (Students Maximizing Achievement through Resources and Time) lunch. It makes sense to do it during the school day when you consider the majority of students that need more help to be successful cannot stay after school. They load up every day and ride the school bus home.” Participant 23 added, “...we have several students that are enrolled in as many as six classes during the semester based on their credit recovery needs and flexibility of the Power Block. With so many students having jobs after school it takes this type of flexibility during the day to meet the needs of our non-traditional learners. These participants believed that an effective school embraces flexibility when considering credit recovery and scheduling as it pertains to students staying on track to graduate with their four-year cohort.

Community Involvement

Table 8 details the occurrences of references to community involvement. Although many of the participants in the study were concerned with items that were categorized under the two

Table 8

Community Involvement

Community Involvement Thematic Occurrence

Theme	Business Alliances	Faith-Based	Collaboration in General
Number of Occurrences	44	37	49
Percentage of Occurrences	73%	61%	81%

Note. Johnston County Schools Focus Group, 2015.

previous subheadings, several other participants communicated concerns that the issue of not graduating from high school could not be solved by educators alone, but needed community involvement as well to respond to the problem. One participant in particular believed that the issue of students not graduating within the expected amount of time should be framed understandable terms to residents of the district. Participant 4 said, “I am not a farmer...I did not grow up on a farm...I live here but do not have any farmers as neighbors...why do we keep encouraging students to take Career and Technical Education courses that focus on agriculture as a sustainable career?” For example, participant 15 revealed, “...I am a Johnston County native...a native of tobacco barns, cucumber markets, and corn fields...there aren’t that many careers today for students in those industries. We should be working with local government and businesses to determine what careers exist out there and then expose our students to this information while in our schools.” Similarly, participant 19 said “...rather than teaching them [students] about traditions of the past like sheep shearing, corn husking, and hog trimming...we should be preparing them to enter the world of work immediately after high school at businesses such as: Grifols and Novo Nordisk [area pharmaceutical companies], Sysco, and Caterpillar.” Further probing in reference to this comment revealed that this participant was involved in local civic organizations and had a strong desire to help assemble and train others within the group on serving as mentors and tutors in local schools. Similarly, participant 18 disclosed, “...in solving the issue of students not graduating from school...we need more interagency collaborations between our schools and civic organizations like Rotary [Rotary International], Kiwanis [Kiwanis International-Global Volunteer Organization], and the Freemasons. These groups want to help. The researcher asserts that the district must harness their energy to help our students. Civic groups are made up of potential employers and we can help our students make real-life

business connections while they are still in school...not to mention the potential for work-related internships and the potential to earn scholarships.” These arguments indicated to the researcher that these participants believed that the task of improving graduation rates was not merely a school issue, but also one with community influence. Further, in seeking to improve the graduation rate to 90%, the school district will need to collaborate with civic organizations to sustain significant and long-lasting change.

Other participants commented on potential collaborations with faith-based organizations. One participant recommended utilizing local pastors or preachers to generate a list of potential volunteers to work with students in and out of school. The participant stated, “...these people are the true community leaders. We want them...no we need them in our buildings working with our students on making better choices.” Another added, “The workforce from a faith-based initiative would be excellent mentors. These people can model good behavior and reinforce what we all do during the school day. They [faith-based volunteers] can help our students find jobs and work with students on resume and interview skills.” Participant 23 expressed, “...I hope someone stresses the importance of being careful with social media. Young people today simply will not listen to parents and teachers about posting things to the internet that are highly inappropriate.” Other participants stated, “Based on the individual student’s needs...they [faith-based volunteers] can help with family assistance...food, clothes, money, transportation for students and parents, and counseling on how to access other community resources.” When analyzing responses, it became evident that these participants believed school collaboration with faith-based partners should be an integral part of any GIP.

Participant 2 asserted, “I appreciate the opportunity to have input into the process of helping more students graduate from school...but in a sense aren’t we reinventing the wheel? To

be sure, hasn't someone, somewhere solved the issue on graduating more students in a timely manner? Why can't we just copy their recipe for success?" To the researcher, this participant conveys compliance in their thinking, rather than a commitment to the district initiative of improving graduation rates. Another participant advocated, "...there are national organizations that specialize in sharing proven strategies on improving graduation rates and providing assistance with crafting graduation plans." Participant 6 continued, "Has anyone centrally reached out to the National Dropout Prevention Center and asked them for assistance with our issue." Another participant added, "has anyone contacted UNCW [The University of North Carolina at Wilmington]...can we use their Dropout Prevention Coalition to help us solve our problem with graduation rates." These statements conveyed the concern of solving the issue of increasing the numbers of students graduating with their cohort without any additional external assistance. Moreover, the participants advocated for central leadership to collaborate with external providers in seeking proven and effective strategies to be used within the district to combat the problem of inadequate graduation rates.

Climate and Culture

Table 9 details the reported occurrences of themes related to climate and culture. The district has invested a large amount of time and effort the last several years to improve climate and culture based on our work to establish high functioning professional learning communities. Participants reported positive climate and culture as a non-negotiable when considering a plan to help all students graduate from school. They perceived these obligations to be necessary and convenient for all learners. For an illustration, participant 21 commented, "so, I see it as my duty or responsibility to create an atmosphere or culture where every student wakes up in the morning and looks forward to coming to school because they enjoy the experience. As our society

Table 9

Climate and Culture

Climate and Culture Thematic Occurrence		
Theme	Concerns With Uncaring Teachers	Limited Empathy
Number of Occurrences	39	39
Percentage of Occurrences	65%	65%

Note. Johnston County Schools Focus Group, 2015.

evolves and embraces new technology and other innovations, so must we if we are to authentically engage our students in the learning process.” Participant 19 disclosed, “I know we have a board policy that prohibits the use of electronic devices in the building, but when we have teachers and students that can utilize cell phones as tools to facilitate learning, do we follow an outdated policy or do we maximize our learning potential in the classroom? That’s an easy question in my opinion if we are truly about doing what is best for students and learning. We are going to do it [use cell phones for instructional purposes]. Similarly, participant 22 voiced unhappiness with the several district policies which were perceived to be obstacles to help students graduate. The participant indicated, “Our job is to help students pass their grade and graduate...far too often our district leadership prevents us from doing this because of an outdated and non-relevant board policy.” Essentially, these participants expressed that the district’s leadership displayed far greater concern for following policy, rather than making decisions with the students’ best interest in mind. They implied to the researcher that there were several district policies that should be revised or possibly suspended based upon the perception that these policies had an adverse effect on culture at the school level.

Besides the aforementioned concerns, a significant number of participants cited concerns with uncaring teachers and their adverse impact on a positive school culture. They reported that many teachers were of little help, tired and unconcerned, disrespectful, and negligent in their duties as classroom teachers. To begin, participant 2 mentioned, “the teachers I inherited wouldn’t be willing to allow students to make up missed assignments...students were too far behind and no one was helping get them back on track.” The same, participant 22 said, “Unfortunately because of the shortage of qualified teachers we are facing, many of our new hires lack basic, proficient skills...some teachers care more about themselves than the students in

their care...many teachers are tired and frustrated and unfortunately take it [frustration] out on the students.” Still participant 4 disclosed, “...some teachers act more like probation officers. If you monitor their interactions with students, it makes you stop and think, do they even like kids?” Participant 15 said, “It’s sad that some teachers have preconceived notions about students before the student ever walks into the teacher’s classroom. Students that have had issues in the past are judged on their previous mistakes and not afforded the opportunity to prove they [the students] have learned from earlier mistakes.” In the same way, participant 20 commented, “...in order to truly help students, students have to know we care about them. The only way to demonstrate our willingness to care and help is through the process of building relationships. Far too often we focus on the technical or curricular component of our job when we should be building relationships with our students. They [students] do not care how much we [educators] know until they [students] know how much we [educators] care.” Basically, these participants expressed that some teachers they worked with daily, displayed inadequate expectations for student achievement and failed to understand the importance of building lasting relationships with their students. Implications for the researcher suggest that some teachers in the district were more concerned with teaching in isolation, rather than helping students learn. These same teachers often maintained low-expectations with regards to student achievement.

Lastly, several participants mentioned that regardless of the initiative, all innovations and programs were doomed for disaster unless a caring administrator was a part of the equation. Common to all successful programs was a supportive and empathetic administrator who possessed the necessary soft skills to communicate with students as well as create an environment that is non-threatening, accommodating, and highly collaborative. Participant 11 announced, “...the individual is so very important in an undertaking of this nature. If the

students don't like the person facilitating the program, they will not participate.” For example, participant 20 added, “we often targeted our most popular teacher for this type of high-stakes initiative...I mean we are talking about students not graduating...I wanted the “pied piper” in charge because I knew students would take ownership and graduate if they liked the person leading the charge.” Additionally, participant 5 offered, “... in all my years as a principal, my impression has always been one in which if students had a close relationship with the adult or some type of connection on another level with the person in charge, they [the student] more than likely would work to reach their fullest potential because they knew that someone believed in them and maintained high expectations that they receive a high school diploma.”

The results from this study conducted in the Johnston County Schools used the responses from 23 participant principals and graduation coaches to construct a GIP consisting of best practices to help students graduate with their four-year cohort. Four areas including data analysis, student and staff learning, community involvement, and climate and culture served as major subgroups when categorizing best practice strategies.

Data Analysis

Question 1: What are the key elements of a Graduation Plan and how can they be consistently implemented in each of the schools in Johnston County?

Data from Table 10 indicates that principals, graduation coaches, and Student Services personnel demonstrated a range of attitudes towards effective programming in helping students graduate from high school. The existing component with the highest rating was After-School which was followed by Alternative Graduation, GRADUATE, and Mentoring. Attitudes towards AVID was somewhat lower than those of the top four factors. The two lowest rated factors were Intervention Block and Online Programs. The study found that the range in

Table 10

JCS Programs

Q1: What specific JCS programs are working in your school that are helping students within a four-year cohort stay on schedule to graduate from high school?

JCS Programs	Thematic Occurrence	Participant Statements
• After-School	• 47%	<i>Participant 9:</i> “Evening Academy does work for students that see their faults in falling behind.”
• Alternative Graduation	• 37%	
• GRADUATE	• 26%	<i>Participant 5:</i> “We have had success with our AVID program promoting and supporting our students to become first generation college students.”
• Mentoring	• 26%	
• AVID	• 16%	<i>Participant 4:</i> “Watch DOG program (Dads of Great Students) to provide mentors for the children who may not have that.”
• Intervention Block	• 11%	
• Online Programs	• 11%	

Note. GIP Survey Data, 2015.

attitudes on the seven factors demonstrated a notable difference in viewpoints as to which programs were most effective in helping students stay on schedule to graduate with their four-year cohort. Table 11 provided evidence that respondents viewed additional allotments for at-risk students directly related to improving graduation rates. Also, data indicates the need for additional professional development for funding and specific training on relationship building as crucial to the overall process of helping students earn a diploma. Staff attitudes towards Interventions and Blocks for Interventions during the Instructional Day were lower than the top two factors. The three lowest related factors were: Revise Policy, Parent Resources/Mentoring, and Philosophy Continuity in the district. The study indicates that the range in attitudes on the six factors demonstrated a notable difference in viewpoints as to which programs were most effective in helping students stay on schedule to graduate with their four-year cohort.

The results provided in Table 12 support evidence that empowering students to take ownership related to their education is related to improved cohort graduation rates. Respondents mentioned guidance conversations as a significant strategy in aiding and assisting students to graduate from school. Adult mentoring and intervention blocks during the instructional day were rated lower than guidance conversations, but higher than after-school programs, parent communication, philosophy continuity in the district, and RtI/MTSS philosophy.

Question 2: What impact if any, has the High Five initiative had on the graduation rate for students who attend the Johnston County Schools?

Data from Table 13 indicates that principals, graduation coaches, and Student Services personnel demonstrated a range of attitudes towards the High Five initiative in helping students graduate from high school. The existing component with the highest rating was Professional Learning Communities which was followed by MTSS/Pyramid of Interventions, and

Table 11

JCS Program Needs

Q2: What program enhancements or tools would you use to add to existing initiatives in your efforts to help more students graduate with their cohort?

JCS Program Needs	Thematic Occurrence	Participant Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional Allotments for At-Risk Students 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 42% 	<p><i>Participant 3:</i> “Look carefully at promotion retention policy based on standardized results.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Additional Professional Development Funding and Specific Training on Relationship-Building 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21% 	<p><i>Participant 11:</i> “An extra allotment at the middle school level to support at risk students.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intervention Block During Instructional Day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16% 	<p><i>Participant 17:</i> “All districts need more training in developing relationships with all students. It is difficult for most educators as they are typically white and middle class. They find it difficult to relate to those from poverty and/or minorities.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Revise Policy 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Parent Resources/Mentoring 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Philosophy Continuity in District 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11% 	<p><i>Participant 19:</i> “Our teachers and staff need a better understanding of the world in which our students live. It is hard to verbally describe some living conditions. Once you stand in the student's shoes (almost literally) it becomes harder to let students fail.”</p>

Note. GIP Survey Data, 2015.

Table 12

Empowering Students Strategies

Q3: What strategies have you utilized in empowering students at your school to take ownership of graduating with their four-year cohort?

Empowering Students Strategies	Thematic Occurrence	Participant Statements
• Guidance Conversations	• 44%	<i>Participant 2:</i> “Our counselors still meet one on one with all of our students when developing their schedules. This is time consuming, but is well worth the time we invest.”
• Adult Mentoring	• 22%	
• Intervention Block During Instructional Day	• 16%	<i>Participant 7:</i> “Data team working through more detailed RtI processes to assist teachers, parents, and students to reduce the number of student retentions in elementary school years.”
• After-School Program	• 11%	
• Parent Communication	• 11%	
• Philosophy Continuity in District	• 11%	
• RtI/MTSS Philosophy	• 11%	

Note. GIP Survey Data, 2015.

Table 13

High Five Programs

Q4: What specific programs do you offer at your school designed to meet the expectations of the High Five initiative?

High Five Programs	Thematic Occurrence	Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Professional Learning Communities 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 21% 	<p><i>Participant 2:</i> “The focus on Professional Learning Communities and vertical planning has allowed for teachers to have a better understanding of the students they serve.”</p> <p><i>Participant 7:</i> “With the High Five, we have the in- school remediation in place for our students. We have Pyramid of Instruction which allows our kids to be successful. We have grading practices in place that allows for students to redo or rework problems or test to increase their performance in a class.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MTSS/Pyramid of Interventions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 21% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intervention Block During Instructional Day 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Mentors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Interest-Based Academies 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Intervention Block 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Improved Grading Practices 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11% 	

Note. GIP Survey Data, 2015.

Intervention Block during Instructional Day. The four lowest rated factors were Mentors, Interest-Based Academies, Intervention Block, and Improved Grading Practices. The study found that the range in attitudes on the seven factors demonstrated a notable difference in viewpoints as which High Five programs were most effective in helping students stay on schedule to graduate with their four-year cohort.

Table 14 indicates that principals, graduation coaches, and Student Services personnel demonstrated a range of attitudes towards the programming needs that would assist them to deliver graduation activities to students that are aligned with the High Five initiative. The existing component with the highest rating was local business alliances, which was followed by community liaisons, Additional non-instructional personnel for at-risk students, and additional data analysis training. The lowest rated factor was additional funding for blended learning (technology). The study found that the range in attitudes on the five factors demonstrated a difference in viewpoints as which programmatic needs that are aligned with the High Five initiative were most helpful in delivering graduation activities to students.

Question 3: What impact if any, has the High Five initiative had on the graduation rates of students in Johnston County Schools with regards to ethnicity and gender?

Table 15 reports that principals, graduation coaches, and Student Services personnel demonstrated a more narrow range of attitudes towards the impact of the High Five initiative on students with regards to ethnicity and gender. The majority of respondents answered no specific impact when considering High Five's impact on students in reference to ethnicity and gender. Fewer respondents answered yes to the Hispanic and African-American ethnicities. Even fewer respondents answered yes to all subgroups impacted. The study found that the range in attitudes

Table 14

High Five Needs

Q5: What programmatic needs do you have that would help you to deliver graduation activities that are aligned with the High Five initiative?

High Five Needs	Thematic Occurrence	Statements
• Local Business Alliances	• 25%	<i>Participant 17</i> : “In order to change the behaviors of students who do not know how to “play the game of school,” there needs to be a certain amount of investment in non-instructional personnel. I have to constantly justify the number of non-instructional support that I provide students. The thought process of those who allocate positions is that all available employees need to be directly instructing students.”
• Community Liaisons	• 17%	
• Additional Non-Instructional Personnel for At-Risk	• 17%	
• Data Analysis Training	• 17%	
• Additional Funding for Blended Learning (technology)	• 11%	

Note. GIP Survey Data, 2015.

Table 15

High Five Initiatives on Ethnicity/Gender

Q10: Is there any impact of the High Five initiative on your students with regards to ethnicity and gender?

High Five Initiatives on Ethnicity/Gender	Thematic Occurrence	Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No Specific Impact 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 53% 	<p><i>Participant 5:</i> “Yes. Our minority students, both black and Hispanic, have benefited in meeting and talking with successful mentors from like socioeconomic and racial groups. Our counselors have "lunch buddies" and other similar small and large group counseling sessions with our boys and girls separately so they can talk more openly about their fears, concerns and share ideas without ridicule.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Yes – Hispanic and African- American 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • All Subgroups Impacted 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 5% 	

Note. GIP Survey Data, 2015.

on the three factors demonstrated a difference in viewpoints regarding High Five's impact on students with regards to ethnicity and gender.

Table 16 data indicates that principals, graduation coaches, and Student Services personnel displayed a range of attitudes on whether or not Johnston County Schools should be offering any additional programs or services to meet the expectations of the High Five initiative in regards to ethnicity and gender. The majority of respondents answered no when considering offering any additional programs or services to meet the expectations of the High Five initiative in regards to ethnicity and gender. Fewer respondents answered yes to this question and other respondents answered with various unrelated topics. The study found that the range in attitudes on the three factors demonstrated a difference in viewpoints regarding offering any additional programs or services.

Question 4: Are there specific groups of students who should receive enhanced programming and services so he/she may graduate from high school with their four-year cohort?

Data from Table 17 indicates that principals, graduation coaches, and Student Services personnel demonstrated a range of attitudes towards identifying students in need of additional programming and/or services in an attempt to keep them on track to graduate within the four-year timeline. The existing component with the highest rating was summative testing data and followed by attendance, grades, and non-instructional personnel. The lowest rated factors were: teacher feedback, retentions, and the education level of parents. The study found that the range in attitudes on the seven factors demonstrated a difference in viewpoints as to which tools are most effective in identifying students who need additional services to graduate within the four-year timeline.

Table 16

Additional High Five Programs for Ethnicity and Gender

Q11: Do you believe JCS should be offering any additional programs or services to meet the expectations of the High Five initiative with regards to ethnicity and gender?

Additional High Five Programs for Ethnicity/Gender	Thematic Occurrence	Statements
• No	• 68%	<i>Participant 9:</i> “The services currently offered are helping meet the needs of most students.”
• Yes	• 21%	
• Various Unrelated	• 16%	<i>Participant 2:</i> “I believe it would benefit us to become more proficient in our current initiatives as opposed to adding more to our plate. A good dose of quality over quantity could be our best remedy.”
	• 16%	
	• 11%	<i>Participant 12:</i> “We can always offer more programs.”

Note. GIP survey Data, 2015.

Table 17

Student Needs

Q6: How do you determine which students are at risk and need enhanced programming and/or services in an attempt to keep them on track to graduate within the four-year timeline?

Determining Student Needs	Thematic Occurrence	Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Summative Testing Data 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 53% 	<p><i>Participant 5:</i> “We target students with chronic absenteeism and those who are not proficient or on grade level based on their EOG scores.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attendance 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 37% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Grades 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Non-Instructional Personnel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 21% 	<p><i>Participant 9:</i> “School Counselors serve a vital role in keeping Administration and the Graduation Coach aware of student issues.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Teacher Feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16% 	<p><i>Participant 14:</i> “That starts with an examination of the Explore scores of incoming 9th graders, constant review of students on the pyramid, placing students in RTI, and reflection of data (credits earned, PLAN scores).”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Retentions 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Educational Level of Parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16% 	

Note. GIP Survey Data.

Table 18 indicates that principals, graduation coaches, and Student Services personnel demonstrated a range of attitudes concerning parent involvement in the delivery of enhanced programming and services to students. The majority of respondents answered communicate with parents (conference). Fewer respondents answered partnerships/use as mentors. The lowest rated factors were: MTSS process, involving mentor/graduation coach; non-instructional personnel, and online courses for students. The study found that the range in attitudes on the five factors demonstrated a difference in viewpoints regarding parental involvement in the delivery of enhanced programming and/or services to their students.

Table 19 indicates that principals, graduation coaches, and Student Services personnel demonstrate a range of attitudes regarding communication with students and parents about enhanced programming and/or services and their ability to explain why there is a lack of progress in staying on track to graduate with their cohort. The existing component with the highest rating was neither have reflected and/or can communicate causes, which was followed by both are disengaged and express a need to work to survive. The two lowest rated factors were express retentions as factor, and express a lack of parental support or resources. The study found that the range in attitudes on the five factors demonstrated a notable difference in viewpoints as why there is a lack of progress in staying on track to graduate with their cohort based on dialogue with students and parents.

Table 20 indicate that principals, graduation coaches, and Student Services personnel demonstrated a range of attitudes towards the most effective data collection methods used in monitoring the progress of selected students. The existing components with the highest ratings were: grades-power school, attendance-power school, teacher-created data walls, and summative reports-cumulative folder. The lowest rated factor was other data-power school. The study found

Table 18

Parent Involvement

Q7: How are student’s parents involved in the process of delivering enhanced programming and/or services?

Parent Involvement	Thematic Occurrence	Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Communicate with Parents (conference) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 77% 	<p><i>Participant 2:</i> “It is imperative that teachers communicate early in the semester with the parents of the students identified in order for the parents to understand that the partnership in their child’s education is real. Parents also have the opportunity to schedule conferences with their child’s counselors so they’ll have a better understanding of the graduation requirements and their child’s specific plan.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Partnerships/Use as Mentors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 27% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> MTSS Process 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 17% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Involve Mentor/Grad Coach; Non-Instructional Personnel 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Online Courses for Students/Resources for Parents 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16% 	

Note. GIP Survey Data, 2015.

Table 19

Parent/Student Reflection

Q8: When you engage in dialogue with students and parents about enhanced programming and/or services, are they able to explain why there is a lack of progress in staying on track to graduate with their cohort?

Parent/Student Reflection	Thematic Occurrence	Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Neither Have Reflected and/or Can Communicate Causes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 26% 	<p><i>Participant 5:</i> “Most of our student population comes from single parent homes with little to no family support systems in place.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Both Are Disengaged 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16% 	<p><i>Participant 2:</i> “Many times, factors outside of school such as split households, parental drug or alcohol abuse, and necessity for the student to join the work force to help pay bills are the rationale given for explaining lack of progress in staying on track to graduate.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Express a Need to Work to Survive 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 16% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Express Retentions as Factor 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11% 	<p><i>Participant 17:</i> “Parents typically do not verbalize why their children are behind.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Express a Lack of Parental Support or Resources 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 11% 	

Note. GIP Survey Data, 2015.

Table 20

Data Collection

Q9: What data collection methods do you use to monitor the progress of these selected students?

Data Collection	Thematic Occurrence	Statements
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Grades – Power School 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16% 	<p><i>Participant 8:</i> “We use pre and post assessments, grades, attendance, EOG/ IReady scores.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Attendance – Power School 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Teacher –Created Data Walls 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16% 	<p><i>Participant 2:</i> “Testing data generated from NCFE's and EOC's, EVAAS data, PLAN, and ACT data give us ample information to determine if a student has the potential to slide or succeed.”</p>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Summative Reports – Cumulative Folder 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 16% 	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Other Data – Power School 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 11% 	<p><i>Participant 12:</i> “Our Graduate coach keeps a profile of all the kids in the program and to monitor their success or failure.”</p>

Note. GIP Survey Data, 2015.

that the range in attitudes on the five factors demonstrated a notable difference in viewpoints as which data collection methods were most effective to monitor the progress of selected students.

Conclusions

The findings of this study have far reaching implications for the school district and community, for rural eastern North Carolina, and those interested in helping more students graduate from school with their four-year cohort. For school leaders in this district, as well as other similar districts, the findings in this case study provide effective and proven strategies to help students graduate from school with their four-year cohort. Research shows that strategies designed to keep students engaged and on track to graduate should be implemented as early as elementary school (Dynarski & Gleason, 1998). Knowing which strategies or programs that lead to improved graduation rates is a necessary step in constructing a GIP for the district.

Results of this research suggest the need for similar studies. While this study did support the method of involving practitioners in identifying best practices to improve graduation rates, the number of participants was limited to 23. A study involving additional participants could enhance the validity of the findings. The unexpected conclusion that after-school programming was viewed as the most beneficial strategy in helping students within a four-year cohort stay on schedule to graduate from high school with their cohort peers may warrant additional research. According to a White House Press Release (2010), after-school opportunities for credit and course recovery are highly encouraged and widely acknowledged as most beneficial in helping students graduate with their four-year cohort. Quite possibly, only those strategies associated with after-school opportunities for credit and course recovery should be identified in future studies. This effort employed qualitative measures to collect, analyze, and synthesize data generated during the inquiry. The data considered in this Critical Incident Case Study was

generated from surveys and a focus group with principals, graduation coaches, and Student Services personnel in the Johnston County Schools concerning information pertinent to improving graduation rates within the district. Specifically, this qualitative study examined responses from surveys concerning views on strategies to improve graduation rates within the district. It should be noted that there may be quantitative studies that could add to the understanding of strategies to improve cohort graduation rates.

Strategies considered for constructing the GIP were categorized by stakeholders into the following areas; data application, student and staff learning, community involvement, and climate and culture. Additional research could confirm these categories as well as the subgroups within each strategy as being most effective when constructing a GIP to improve cohort graduation rates.

Several factors limit the generalizability of the findings from this study. The sample size in this case study was limited to 54 possible participants. School administrators in Johnston County participated in this study; therefore a larger sample size would be more advantageous. While it is worthy and pertinent to examine the issue of graduation rates exclusively within a single district that has a history of poor four-year cohort graduation rates, a more representative study could include public schools from additional regional large and rural districts. Some practitioners did not choose to participate in the study. Of the 54 potential survey participants, 23 elected to participate by responding to the survey questions. A lower return rate could adversely affect the confidence that those participants' responses could be assumed to accurately reflect the respondent's true evaluation of best practices to improve four-year cohort graduation rates. Although the sample size seems to be the most obvious limitation of the study, Patton suggests that "the validity, meaningfulness, and insights generated from qualitative inquiry have

more to do with the information richness of the cases selected and the observational or analytical capabilities of the researcher than with sample size” (2002, p. 245). There are a number of research studies that have small sample sizes, but accurately represent a larger population.

Additionally, this study utilizes a survey completed through anonymous sampling. With this in mind, it is nearly impossible to determine if the study is based on a variety of grade levels or not. As it appears to the researcher, data is partial to high school opinions. It is the assumption of the researcher that the elementary principals may have found the survey to be irrelevant to the students they serve. The failure of the elementary principals to respond to the survey could be an indication of a lack of knowledge in regards to their role in the four year cohort graduation rate and the fact that this process begins in Kindergarten. Therefore, they may not have participated and were not as fully engaged as the middle and high school participants. The methodology of the study accounted for this limitation that is associated with anonymous, random sampling by utilizing criterion sampling in the interview process as a first step to the research. The criterion sampling in the interview process produced controlled representation of participants from elementary, middle and high school. This effort ensured the proposed GIP included strategies from all levels.

Recommendations

Interpretations presented here and in earlier sections of this chapter suggest the following policy and/or procedural recommendations which focus on the importance of a systemic Graduation Improvement Plan (GIP) to assist the district in improving its four-year cohort graduation rate.

Recommendation 1

Existing data indicates that parent involvement is important, but lacking in the school district. In order to improve the district's four-year cohort graduation rate, collaboration and dialogue among school administrators, students and parents, and county leaders must occur on a regular basis. Data also indicates that business partnerships and faith-based initiatives should be utilized with more frequency as strategies to improve collaboration and more importantly, combat the issue of low graduation rates.

Recommendation 2

According to research findings in this district, school administrators and other site-based educators are charged with identifying students early on in the learning process who will need additional programming and resources to graduate with their four-year cohort. An individualized learning plan must be constructed to monitor and regulate their academic success.

Recommendation 3

An emerging trend from survey data acknowledges the need for continuing professional development for all educators in the district concerning the implementation and support for the GIP. A focus of this professional development should encompass the need for enhanced leadership soft skills among educators as well as poverty training and relationship building.

Recommendation 4

In the spirit of the continuous improvement cycle, district policies and practices should be reviewed and revised in an effort to establish philosophies that are conducive to the graduation success of all subgroups identified in the proposed GIP.

Recommendation 5

According to research findings involving this case study, district officials are encouraged to review, update, and revise grading policies as well as grade retention policies and provide staff development to stakeholders on factors related to these topics of concern.

Recommendation 6

As the Graduation Improvement Plan is implemented in the Johnston County School system, each of the 44 school sites is encouraged to study the effectiveness of the model for future revisions.

Recommendation 7

Existing data indicates that parent involvement is important in improving four year cohort graduation rates. More study will need to be conducted regarding the involvement of parents in the graduation improvement process.

In addition to these recommendations, the America's Promise Alliance (2008) acknowledges that unacceptably low levels of minority, low-income, English language learners (ELL), and students with disabilities are graduating with their four-year cohort. In contesting the issue of low graduation rates, the Alliance recognizes the following opportunities in working towards a national 90% graduation rate:

- Graduation rates for students with disabilities and ELL students remain in the very low 60s.
- African-American and Hispanic/Latino students are still graduating 10-15 points behind the national average.
- Low-income students are graduating at a rate that's almost 15 percentage points below the rate for their non-low-income peers.

- In 11 states, less than 70% of low-income students graduate. Nearly nine out of 10 middle- and high- income students are graduating on time, while only 7 in 10 low-income students graduate on time.
- While students with disabilities have shown some progress, with almost 62% now graduating on time, they still lag almost 20 percentage points behind the national graduation rate. Students with disabilities constitute 13% of K-12 public school enrollment, so achieving the GradNation goal will rest heavily on raising their graduation rates.

Summary

In the United States and North Carolina, school districts, society as a whole, and government agencies continue to search for strategies to improve graduation rates. The purpose of this study was to construct a graduation improvement plan for all the Johnston County Schools that will improve the district's four-year cohort graduation rate to 90%. This topic remains pertinent based on the fact that in times of economic pressure, many programs created for the sole purpose of improving graduation rates, are being eliminated. Leaders and other decision makers need to be highly informed about the overall effectiveness of programs and strategies as they seek to improve four-year cohort graduation rates in Johnston County.

This qualitative effort utilized Critical Incident Case Study methodology to describe how stakeholders perceived the most effective strategies in improving graduation rates at their school and how likely these strategies can be applied in a district-wide graduation plan. The researcher has presented the rationale for selecting this method of inquiry, and provided discussion to inform the reader of the qualities needed to be a successful qualitative investigator. Case study methodology was examined followed by what was seen as strengths of the critical instance case

study. Data collections procedures were discussed and the method used to analyze data was explained as well.

The study provided best practices and strategies identified in the construction of a GIP for Johnston County Schools, with the outcome of improving the district's four-year cohort graduation rate to 90%. More than likely, there will continue to be a great deal of interest in promoting and increasing cohort graduation rates for American public school students. The literature on effective strategies to improve cohort graduation rates, as well as the results of this study identified strategies that fell into the categories of data analysis, staff and student learning, community involvement, and climate and culture. In answering the four research questions, information was used from the survey responses, as well as the replies provided by the respondents themselves during interviews.

Question 1: What are the key elements of a Graduation Improvement Plan and how can they be consistently implemented in each of the schools in Johnston County?

The respondents answered that after-school programs and Alternative Graduation Plans were most effective in helping students remain on schedule to graduate with their four-year cohort. Other areas worthy of mention includes the need for additional personnel in working with at-risk students as well as additional professional development in the area of relationship-building for those persons designated to work with identified students. Additionally, respondents communicated the importance of school counselors in the process of helping students graduate with their four-year cohort as well as the need for more qualified adult mentors.

Question 2: What impact if any, has the High Five initiative had on the graduation rate for students who attend the Johnston County Schools?

The respondents answered that High Five initiatives dealing with Professional Learning Communities and Pyramids of Intervention were most beneficial in increasing graduation rates for students in the Johnston County Schools. Consequently, respondents conveyed the desire and need for more inter-agency collaboration with local business alliances in the delivery of graduation activities aimed at improving the district's four-year cohort graduation rate.

Question 3: What impact if any, has the High Five initiative had on graduation rates of students in Johnston County Schools with regards to ethnicity and gender?

The majority of respondents answered that the High Five initiative had no specific impact on students with regards to ethnicity and gender. Other respondents in the minority answered that the initiatives did impact Hispanic and African-American students, as well as, impacting all students regardless of ethnicity and gender. Additionally, the respondents answered Johnston County Schools should not be offering any additional programs or services to meet the expectations of the High Five initiative with regards to ethnicity and gender, but should focus on current initiatives and develop proficiency with these programs and services before adding additional programs or services.

Question 4: Are there specific groups of students who should receive enhanced programming and services so he/she may graduate from high school with their four-year cohort?

The respondents answered that there are specific groups of students who should receive enhanced programming and services so he/she may graduate from high school with their four-year cohort, and these groups may differ from school to school based upon a thorough analysis of the data. Respondents identified measures such as: summative test data, attendance, and grades in recognizing which students are at risk of not graduating with their four-year cohort. Respondents also noted that it is imperative that teachers communicate early in the semester with

the parents of identified students in order for the parents to understand that the partnership between the home and school is real and viable. Respondents also expressed that more often than not parents of identified students who need additional programming and resources to graduate with their four-year cohort have little or no additional supports in place, and often require the students to join the work force at an early age to help pay bills and contribute to other family expenses.

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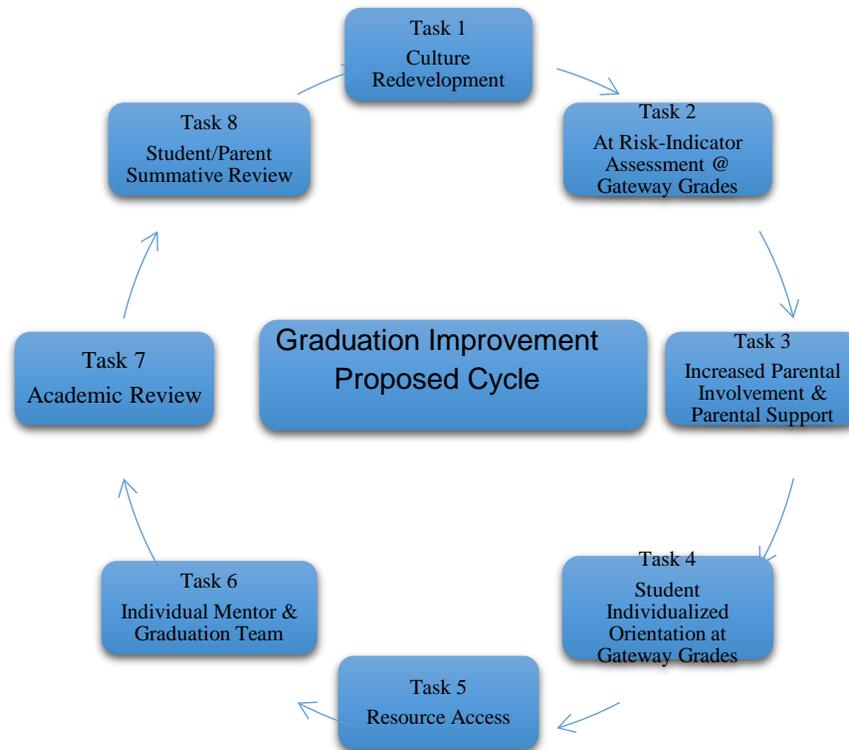
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APPENDIX A: GRADUATION IMPROVEMENT PROPOSED CYCLE



Introduction to the Model

The proposed Graduation Improvement Plan is developed in response to the research conducted regarding the use of strategies assisting students to graduate within their four year graduation cohort. Data was analyzed utilizing data produced by *Nvivo* software and multiple interviews with Johnston County current school practitioners and graduation coaches. In turn, a system-wide model was developed utilizing a cyclical graphic to depict tasks for improvement of graduation rates of students. Data gathered from the data analysis was organized in terms of thematic occurrence. Overall strategies identified from the research provided the framework for the proposed GIP model.

Culture Redevelopment

The proposed GIP is based on a foundational belief that the adults involved in the educational process are knowledgeable of the various cultures and life experiences of the students. We must first control the variable of the adult in this process. Hence, the proposal's effectiveness is ultimately determined by the skillset of the adults involved. For this reason, we propose that all faculty and staff receive training in poverty and relationship-building for the purpose of redeveloping school culture to reflect the necessary skills needed to increase graduation rates. Relationship building, knowledge of attitudes and behaviors, poverty, and creating conditions within school to increase graduation rates must become an integral part of each school culture. It must also be reflected intentionally in the mission of the school and the school improvement plan. Poverty education based upon the work of Ruby Payne and Relationship building through the work of Rita Pierson can serve as examples of entry points for establishing the desired, student-friendly environment in a school setting. These two concepts are the critical tenets of the re-culturing process; however, as indicated by the participants in the study, Professional Learning Communities and the Multi-Tiered Support system are critical factors as well. Each of these High Five Initiatives requires professional development and a paradigm shift in culture. In essence, the study's participants suggest that graduation success is driven by a collaborative culture which provides multiple opportunities and self-pacing for students. Thus, in addition to creating a culture of teachers who are knowledgeable about the impact of poverty and the positive influence of relationships, this GIP proposes that the environment must be collaborative and willing to afford students multiple opportunities to be successful. This training is the first and most crucial task in the redevelopment of school culture and the cornerstone of the GIP.

Task 1-At-Risk Indicator Assessment

As a first step in the process of empowering students to graduate, we must determine which students need additional supports through the use of a district-developed assessment. The at-risk assessment (Appendix 2) is given at the gate-way grades (3, 5, and 8). Additionally, these students would be tracked using the assessment on a yearly basis in the 9-12 grade span. This assessment is based on researched-based factors correlated to graduation rates. At-risk behavior is often defined, but not limited to poor attendance, disciplinary actions resulting in suspension, low socio-economic status, non-compliance or inability to “play the school game,” retentions, poor grades, lack of parental or student involvement, minimal language skills, and deficient social skills (Patton, 2002).) The assessment uses these factors in a matrix to determine students who need additional educational supports, whether academic, behavioral, or social. The guidance department and/or graduation coach tracks and then utilize this information to begin the process of providing supports. Beyond the use of the at-risk assessment, the study’s participants, through a 53% thematic occurrence, indicated the use of summative test scores as a means of identifying potential students. Likewise, the study’s participants, through a 37% thematic occurrence, suggested that summative scores should be augmented with teacher-assigned grades. For this reason, the GIP academic and summative review will detail the current year’s summative data and assigned grades.

Task 2-Increased Parental Involvement and Support

After identifying students who will need additional support(s) to graduate with their four-year cohort, it now becomes incumbent that the school initiate identified strategies in helping parents assume a more active role in the learning process. It is imperative that communication between the school and home start early in the school year and the dialogue involve multiple data points

to completely depict the student's efforts to date. Once this occurs, hopefully parents and students will perceive the school as a "safe-zone" where the adults are concerned about learning and are compassionate regarding the students placed in their care. An atmosphere must exist where parents feel as if they are partners with the school as it pertains to the learning process with one partner just as important as the other. Additional support staff is assigned to the student in the form of a mentor and each mentor embraces the student and the parents. Parents must feel appreciated, valued, and supported in the school setting if we are to convince them of the importance of education. Once this partnership is created, parents will help their student understand that schools and school personnel are caring and empathetic rather than indifferent or unfeeling.

Task 3-Customized Student Orientation at Gateway Grades

In addition to partnerships and creating a "safe-zone" for our students and parents, identified students and their parents should have the opportunity to receive customized orientations led by mentors, school counselors, and/or graduation coaches. In stressing the importance of the learning process, the student must understand their role in the collaboration as well. Orientations of this design spotlight the student as well as the interventions that have been enacted to place the student in a position to be successful. More often than not, and in the absence of identified interventions, the majority of these students are lost "between the cracks," frequently overlooked and underappreciated. The customized orientation affords the student the opportunity to communicate concerns and questions in a non-threatening environment while having the time and attention to process answers. Involved students need reassurances that the educational environment recognizes them for who they are as individuals. The transition from elementary school to middle school and from middle school to high school often creates anxiety for all

students, but especially for those students identified as being at-risk of not graduating with their four-year cohort. The customized orientation will help alleviate much of this anxiety. As much as the orientation is about the student, it also allows the facilitating team the opportunity to begin building a relationship with the student and his family. Team members will look for those things that may be of special interest to the student as well as assessing the student's reaction to various parts of the school building. In order for the identified student to be successful, it is essential that the customized orientation session occur at each grade level gateway.

Task 4-Resource Access

Through partnerships with local businesses as well as collaborations with the faith-based community, schools have the ability to generate a variety of resources in providing additional means or measures to identified students. Items used to support students include, but is not limited to the following; seasonal clothing including footwear, formal attire, appropriate physical education apparel, as well as instructional supplies. In an effort to control the variable of social acceptance, students should be given the opportunity to “look” like other students in the building. Within the parameters associated with these resources, parents of identified students are also afforded access to the supplies in an effort to solidify the bond or relationship between school and home.

Resources also take the form of programming available to identified students. Both in-school and after-school opportunities for credit recovery are offered to students as a “best practice” in staying on schedule to graduate with their four-year cohort. Initiatives such as: SMART lunch, AGP (Alternative Graduate Plan), and GRADUATE! afford students the opportunity recover credit and graduate as planned. Respondents viewed this type of programming as well as

strategies including guidance conversations and mentoring as most beneficial in helping students graduate with their four-year cohort.

It should also be noted, and with significant thematic occurrence, respondents advocated for additional resources in combatting the issue of low graduation rates. Those programmatic enhancements included adding more non-instructional personnel to further work more closely with identified students and families as well as additional professional development on poverty training and relationship building to empower faculty and staff members in taking ownership of low graduation rates.

Task 5-Individual Mentor and Graduation Team

Each at-risk student must be assigned an ally, or an individual who has great relationship skills, are willing to spend additional time with the student, and believes that all students can learn. The individuals assigned as mentors and/or graduation team must also portray the characteristics listed in Task 1, the re-culturing of the faculty, in that he/she is invested in mastery and individual success. This individual also forges a strong relationship with the parent through consistent communication. In referencing the results of the participants, through a 47% thematic occurrence, these relationships can be extended beyond the instructional day by spending individual time after school with the students. The participants indicated, through a 26% thematic occurrence, that this mentoring process is an integral component of student success. More specifically, through a 44% thematic occurrence, the study participants suggested that this mentor is traditionally a member of the guidance department. However, the participants also identified, through a 25% thematic occurrence, that local business alliances offer mentor opportunities for students as well.

The middle and high school at-risk student is also assigned to the graduation team, a group of adults recognized for their creative thinking, knowledge of alternative scheduling, and awareness of various cultures and life experiences. This mentor or team is essential in the success of the student. The team should consider personalized scheduling regarding given to teacher selection. Likewise, the graduation team or mentor balances student schedules to make certain that core and tested courses are distributed throughout the school year and not dropped into one, difficult semester. Also, taken into consideration is the student's participation in athletics with attention provided to address seasonal involvement. Finally, it is the role of the graduation team to utilize creative scheduling measures when working with an at-risk student. According to the study's participants, the team may consider the at-risk student be assigned to the graduation team, a group of adults recognized for their creative thinking, knowledge of alternative scheduling, and awareness of various cultures and life experiences.

Task 6-Academic Review

A crucial step of the graduation plan is the use of the full academic review as a tool to further assess the effectiveness of the interventions implemented in the previous steps in the cycle. This important step is necessary to bring in the teachers, administrators, graduation team, and/or mentors assigned to the students. This step occurs at least annually, or on an as needed basis dependent upon the data presented to the mentor or graduation team. The review consists of an academic review of the student's performance indicators presented from the at-risk assessment. Further, the review consists of the presentation of resources and interventions. Thematic occurrence data suggests that 53% of participants regard the use of summative testing data as helpful in the review of programming for students. Additionally, 37% of respondents regard the use of attendance data. Twenty six percent of respondents report the review of grades

as necessary to monitor the progress as necessary to review the progress of students, while 47% of respondents report that after school programming is essential and could be a practical strategy. Further, the data suggests that 37% of respondents report this as an opportunity with alternative graduation measures within this step of the process.

Task 8- Parent/Student Summative Review

As with any continuous improvement process, feedback is vital. After identifying and providing additional needs to at-risk students, it is paramount to get parent and student perspectives on the process. It is this step that ensures that the parent, student, graduation team and/or mentor summarize all pertinent data, interventions, and perceptions. This final step during a gateway year provides the opportunity to celebrate successes, correct concerns, and to continue to engage the student and family in the process. Thematic occurrence data from the survey reports that 26% of parents and students cannot reflect or communicate the causes of dropping out of school. 16% of respondents reports that both students and parents are disengaged. This data reflects the need for a model which involves continuous communication with both the student and the parent.

APPENDIX B: GRADUATION IMPROVEMENT PLAN SURVEY QUESTIONS

1. What specific JCS programs are working in your school that are helping students within a four-year cohort, stay on schedule to graduate from high school? (i.e. Alternative Graduation Program, Evening Academy, GRADUATE, etc.)
2. What program enhancements or tools would you add to existing initiatives in your efforts to help more students graduate with their cohort?
3. What strategies have you utilized in empowering students at your school to take ownership of graduating with their four-year cohort?
4. What specific programs do you offer at your school designed to meet the expectations of the High Five initiative?
5. What programmatic needs do you have that would help you to deliver graduation activities that are in line with the High Five initiative?
6. How do you determine which students are at risk and need enhanced programming and/or services in an attempt to keep them on track to graduate within the four-year timeline?
7. How are student's parents involved in the process of delivering enhanced programming and/or services?
8. When you engage in dialogue with students and parents about enhanced programming and/or services, are they able to explain why there is a lack of progress in staying on track to graduate with their cohort?
9. What data collection methods do you use to monitor the progress of these selected students?
10. Is there any impact of the High Five initiative on your students with regards to ethnicity and gender?
11. Do you believe JCS should be offering any additional programs or services to meet the expectations of the High Five initiative with regards to ethnicity and gender?

APPENDIX C: SAMPLE SCHOOL PROFILE

2012/2013 SCHOOL PROFILE REPORT

Smithfield-Selma High School (1,134 students)									
2012 Risk Factor: 33.4 [12.6%] (Attendance Factor: 8.3 [8.3%] Discipline Factor: 3.0 [4.5%] Grade Factor: 22.1 [22.1%])									
	Attendance	Discipline Referrals			Grade Average for Report Period				
	Days Absent	Num Incidents	Num ISS	Num OSS	Subject	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4
Report Period 1	2,928	254	33	64	English	77.9			
Report Period 2	1,318	64	15	22	Math	76.3			
Report Period 3	0	0	0	0	Science	80.4			
Report Period 4	0	0	0	0	Social Studies	83.0			
Total	4,246	318	48	86	Period Average:	79.1			

2012/2013 Student Profile Report

Grade Level: 12 Ethnicity: Hispanic Gender: F School: Smithfield-Selma High School									
2012 Factor: 31.8 [11.9%] (Attendance: 17.8 [17.8%], Discipline: 0.0 [0.0%], Grades: 14.0 [14.0%])									
Risk Factor: 31.8 [17.3%]									
	Attendance	Discipline Referrals			Grade Average for Report Period				
	Days Absent	Num Incidents	Num ISS	Num OSS	Course (Instructor) or Subject	Period 1	Period 2	Period 3	Period 4
Report Period 1	1	0	0	0	Math	85.0			
Report Period 2	1	0	0	0	Science	87.0			
Report Period 3	0	0	0	0	Discrete Mathematics Honors (Polito, Therese)	85			
Report Period 4	0	0	0	0	Physics Honors (Petersen, Mark A)	87			
Total	2	0	0	0					

School Year: 2011 Grade Level: 11 School: Smithfield-Selma High School									
2011 Factor: 28.9 [6.6%] (Attendance: 8.9 [4.2%], Discipline: 0.0 [0.0%], Grades: 20.0 [27.4%])									
Attendance		Discipline Referrals			Subject Final Grade		Test Details		
Days Absent:	4	Incident Total:	0	English:	80				
		ISS Total:	0	Math:	80				
		OSS Total:	0	Science:	80				
				Social Studies:	80				

School Year: 2010 Grade Level: 10 School: Smithfield-Selma High School									
2010 Factor: 37.0 [8.4%] (Attendance: 22.2 [10.4%], Discipline: 0.0 [0.0%], Grades: 14.8 [20.2%])									
Attendance		Discipline Referrals			Subject Final Grade		Test Details		
Days Absent:	10	Incident Total:	0	English:	85				
		ISS Total:	0	Math:	79				
		OSS Total:	0	Science:	89				
				Social Studies:	88				

School Year: 2009 Grade Level: 09 School: Smithfield-Selma High School									
2009 Factor: 34.1 [7.8%] (Attendance: 17.8 [8.3%], Discipline: 0.0 [0.0%], Grades: 16.3 [22.4%])									
Attendance		Discipline Referrals			Subject Final Grade		Test Details		
Days Absent:	8	Incident Total:	0	English:	85	Algebra II	156	III	
		ISS Total:	0	Math:	80	English I	158	IV	
		OSS Total:	0	Science:	86				
				Social Studies:					

At-Risk Monitoring System-Description

Johnston County Schools utilizes the county-designed *At-Risk Monitoring System* to identify and monitor students at-risk of dropping out of school. The district partnered with a programmer and developed a tool that minimizes human error by pulling data from our current student data hub. The At-Risk Monitoring System is unique because it provides its users with not only an at-risk report, but a student profile and a school profile. The system is a K-12 system and can be updated each grading period.

Highlights of the At-risk Report

- Students at high risk of dropping out are identified based on current and previous (up to 3 years) attendance, discipline, and grades/the current year weighs more than the previous three years;
- Problem areas contributing to high risk is identified;
- **Discipline component:** out-of-school suspensions are weighted heavier than in-school suspensions and an office referral is weighted least ($2 \times \text{\#incidents} + 4 \times \text{\#ISS} + 10 \times \text{\#OSS}$);
- **Grades component:** only core courses are used as factors of risk/students with a D or lower will receive a risk value ($100 - (\text{grade average})$); and,
- **Attendance component:** $(400 \times (\text{days absent}) / 180)$.

Overall Risk Factors

Johnston County Schools use data from the current year's attendance records, the last 3-year's attendance records, the current year's discipline records, the last 3-year's discipline records, the current year's grades (Eng, Math, SS, and Science), and the last 3-year's grades. ([8

* (factor for current year) + 4 * (factor for year -1) + 2 * (factor for year-2) + 1* (factor for year -
3)] / (number between 1 and 15, depending on what yearly values were available).

APPENDIX D: INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD APPROVAL LETTER



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY
University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office
4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building· Mail Stop 682
600 Moye Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834
Office **252-744-2914** · Fax **252-744-2284** · www.ecu.edu/irb

Notification of Initial Approval: Expedited

From: Social/Behavioral IRB

To: [David Renfrow](#)

CC:

[Art Rouse](#)

Date: 9/8/2015

Re: [UMCIRB 15-000306](#)

Constructing a Graduation Improvement Plan for Johnston County Schools

I am pleased to inform you that your Expedited Application was approved. Approval of the study and any consent form(s) is for the period of 9/7/2015 to 9/6/2016. The research study is eligible for review under expedited category # 7. The Chairperson (or designee) deemed this study no more than minimal risk.

Changes to this approved research may not be initiated without UMCIRB review except when necessary to eliminate an apparent immediate hazard to the participant. All unanticipated problems involving risks to participants and others must be promptly reported to the UMCIRB. The investigator must submit a continuing review/closure application to the UMCIRB prior to the date of study expiration. The Investigator must adhere to all reporting requirements for this study.

Approved consent documents with the IRB approval date stamped on the document should be used to consent participants (consent documents with the IRB approval date stamp are found under the Documents tab in the study workspace).

The approval includes the following items:

Name	Description
There are no items to display	
Constructing A Graduation Improvement Plan For Johnston County Schools	Study Protocol or Grant Application
Graduation Improvement Plan Survey	Surveys and Questionnaires
Invitation to Edit	Consent Forms

The Chairperson (or designee) does not have a potential for conflict of interest on this study.

APPENDIX E: IRB TITLE CHANGE EMAIL

Joyner, Gwen

From: David Renfrow <rossrenfrow@johnston.k12.nc.us>
Sent: Wednesday, November 25, 2015 11:03 AM
To: Joyner, Gwen; Rouse, Art
Subject: Fwd: IRB: Amendment Approved

Sent from my iPhone

Begin forwarded message:

From: <umcirb@ecu.edu>
Date: November 25, 2015 at 10:44:08 AM EST
To: <renfrowd83@students.ecu.edu>
Subject: IRB: Amendment Approved
Reply-To: <umcirb@ecu.edu>



EAST CAROLINA UNIVERSITY

University & Medical Center Institutional Review Board Office

4N-70 Brody Medical Sciences Building · Mail Stop 682

600 Moyer Boulevard · Greenville, NC 27834

Office 252-744-2914  Fax 252-744-2284  www.ecu.edu/irb

Amendment Approved

ID: Ame1_UMCIRB 15-000306

Title: Amendment 1 for IRB Study #UMCIRB 15-000306

Description: Your amendment has been approved. To navigate to the project workspace, click on the above ID.

IRB00000705 East Carolina U IRB #1 (Biomedical) IORG0000418

IRB00003781 East Carolina U IRB #2 (Behavioral/SS) IORG0000418

