The Dissertation Committee for Sean Andrew Haley
Certifies that this is the approved version of the following dissertation:

Dropping Out Of High School:

A Focus Group Approach to Examining Why Students Leave and Return

Committee:

_____

Toni Falbo, Supervisor

_____

Cindy Carlson

_____

Maria Robledo Montecel

_____

Richard Valencia

_____

Frank Wicker

Dropping Out Of High School:

A Focus Group Approach to Examining Why Students Leave and Return

by

Sean Andrew Haley, B.A.; M.Ed.

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Dedication

This work is respectfully dedicated to…

Those persons who literally sacrificed their lives (willingly or by unexpected forces) in

the pursuit of just and equitable circumstances for ALL youth; those persons who have

devoted their lives to such a noble cause as this, and those persons who continue the

struggle to bring about such circumstances; and, those youths whose lives have been

unjustly left to chance and unduly sacrificed during the interim struggle.

To whom much is given, much is required.

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Dropping Out Of High School:

A Focus Group Approach to Examining Why Students Leave and Return

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Sean Andrew Haley, Ph.D.

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Supervisor: Toni Falbo

The vast majority of the 'early school leaver' research conducted over the past twenty-five years identifies a multitude of endogenous factors and correlates that are frequently used to identify students considered "at-risk" of dropping out of school. It has become generally accepted that schools play a more significant role than earlier acknowledged in ensuring successful high school completion for all students. Nonetheless, there remains a dearth of research that provides opportunities for inspection of the aspects of schools that might contribute to early school departure. Even fewer studies have measured students own perspectives on the matter.

This study examined the voices of twenty-seven former traditional high school students who opted to leave school at least once prior to graduation (a.k.a., "drop out"), but had since re-enrolled in an urban charter school and were actively pursuing completion of their high school diploma. Via the use of focus group research (Krueger,

1994) a dialogue was created among the participants that enabled identification and interpretation of student perceptions of the schools that they decided to leave and the nature of the encounters within those institutions.

The primary research questions that guided the study were: (1) what do students "dislike" about the school; (2) what factors about the school lead to students' decisions to leave; and, (3) what motivated students to return to school? Several thematic categories emerged from the focus group discussions. Reasons for leaving school fell under the five categories of *care, relationships, school/class size, policies,* and *professionalism.* Reasons for returning were categorized as *family, future opportunities, personal goals, peers,* and *boredom.* Decisions to return were eased by elements of the new school, including the *school structure, school environment*, and the *AmeriCorps Program.* Influences on the participants' continuation in school since re-enrollment included *family, personal goals,* and *the new school environment.* Participant responses extend the current body of knowledge around the issue of early school departure, while providing new insights into how schools can hinder or help high school completion.

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CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

When the word dropout is mentioned in reference to a high school student many different images and assumptions about that student likely arise. For example, common characterizations of high school dropouts may call forth attributions of poverty, juvenile delinquency, academic instability, academic failure, and various forms of personal ineptness and irresponsibility to name a few. This socially constructed identifier, the term "dropout" that is, has gained a powerfully clear and stable position in the lexicon of educators, researchers, and layman alike. Sadly, the lexical denotations of the term are most frequently saturated with negative imagery and accusation-filled interpretations. "Serving to both 'individualize' and 'totalize' the varied experiences of contradictions endemic to modern forms of compulsory schooling…this term focuses on characteristics presumably shared by individuals and groups who don't react in 'normal' ways to social relations and practices of schools" (Dehli, 1996, p. 9). Such traditional associations and images caste passive and unfavorable stigmas on young people that do not necessarily fail to complete school due to being a victim of circumstances, but rather they may make conscientious decisions to leave school based on disillusionment and/or perceptions of systemic forms mistreatment. By castigating the student for faults presumed internal while effectively upholding policies and practices of the school system, both the student and the system are ultimately cheated.

Predominant trends in policy and research related to high school dropouts and concomitant ideologies primarily attempt to resolve dropout issues by focusing on the individual. One serious problem with this process is the fact that a full investigation of

potential systemic problems and/or precursors that may contribute to the dropout

epidemic is circumvented by focusing attention primarily on characteristics of students

who opt to leave school. In a discussion of gaps between research and policy Melissa

Roderick exposes this prolific dropout research trend of primarily investigating student-

related variables. Roderick (1993) explains the circumstance as follows:

> Reducing dropout rates requires a commitment by school systems, school
>
> administrators, and teachers to make dropout prevention a priority. Indeed, the
>
> failure of initiatives to reduce dropout rates has often been attributed to a lack of
>
> institutional support and to the inability of these initiatives to affect how schools
>
> operate (Grannis, 1991; Wehlage et al., 1992).… Much of our information on
>
> dropouts and graduates has come from several large, longitudinal studies
>
> conducted over the past several decades…. Analyses of these surveys have not,
>
> for the most part, moved us closer to an understanding of how school experiences
>
> affect the decision to drop out. (p.17)

While a growing body of research now concentrates on formulating understanding and

solutions based on more than what is commonly referred to as a victim-blame perspective

(Kronick and Hargis, 1990; Valencia, 1997), negative stigmas abound.

So as students are frequently despised for showing a lack of adjustment to

schooling norms, while often concurrently considered a societal nemesis, the proverbial

finger of fault is regularly pointed at those who decide to dropout. As a result, the

nationalized identity of high school dropouts leans towards characterizations and images

of persons who are academically inept, personally irresponsible, and/or socially

undesirable. However, these presumptions actually fall short of telling the true story

about the students and the circumstances that lead to their decisions to leave school.

Moreover, little consideration is given to the possibility that the schools may actually

contribute largely to the decisions that students ultimately make to depart. Kronick and

Hargis (1990) emphasize the aforementioned point in the introduction of their treatise

stating:

> We do not deny that problems exist in many of these students and may well be
>
> contributing factors, but they are primary factors with only a minority of the
>
> dropouts. We believe that we have, for too long a time, looked for problems
>
> within the dropout and have avoided looking for the cause in the system from
>
> which they drop. We have a tendency to blame the victim. We avoid thinking of
>
> our schools as victimizers…. Too, often we treat the extremes of individual
>
> variations in students as maladies to be cured" (p. 5).

In addition to an apparent affinity towards studying student-related variables, popular

research inquiries tend to de-emphasize the exploration of free-flowing perceptions of

students who dropout regarding the institutions that have failed to retain them. Rather the

tendency is to create or utilize instruments replete with notions constructed a priori,

which in effect distills, directs, distorts and arguably even hinders the true voices of the

students from being heard. Although a growing interest in student voice is occurring,

typically the students are given no sounding board; no opportunity to relay the kinds of

experiences that underscore their decisions to leave school.

By giving less attention to the role schools play in a student's decision to leave

trivializes the true nature of the intention of schooling—to serve all students. This is particularly true of public schools by virtue of the fact that all citizens have a right to equal access and more importantly equal education under the law. Under no other system is it clearer at least in word that the nature and intent of public education is to serve the masses. The national motto of the United States Department of Education (USDOE), "No Child Left Behind", is found prominently displayed on documents, web sites and in other departmental forums. Under this banner the country has been lead into sweeping reform that calls for the expenditure of millions of dollars, the creation of new statewide legislation, and even the closing of schools that fail to meet this as measured by federal and state laws.

Ironically, while contemporary educational mantras reverberate with calls for reaching and teaching all children, it is disheartening to observe that no explicit plan of action to address dropout issues is expressed within the priorities as published by the USDOE (2001). It is unfortunate that the national educational platform as articulated in these priorities by the nation's President and the Secretary of Education lack any explicit guidance in this matter given the far reaching consequences and costs of dropping out to both the dropout victims and the nation. As with most education policy matters the national stance is to allow for local regulation of this issue. Under the Texas statewide educational accountability system school performance ratings are directly tied to the dropout rates in addition to other factors. State legislation has also been passed that attempts to stymie the dropout dilemma by setting out standards and program regulations that all districts must abide by, which include provisions for school staff to identify and

provide additional academic support services to students considered to be "at-risk" of dropping out of school.

In digressing from this commentary it must be stated that the intent of this research is not to be politically charged, however it is difficult to overlook the possible consequences of the denial that seems prevalent on a national level when examining dropout issues. For example, the availability of funding for special programs and for the continued promotion of research in the field of education is often established by and reflective of national priorities. Furthermore, under what is considered a "dismal education funding bill" (NASSP, 2006) Congress has only directly allocated $4.9 million of the budget specifically for dropout prevention. While many argue that progress towards eradicating the dropout dilemma has been made, the nation is in no position to become complacent. Rather encouragement to seek novel approaches with regard to the dropout dilemma in order to create additional resolutions and interventions might best be promoted via a national platform.

In the mean time the traditional stance of blaming the victim for circumstances not necessarily under his or her control must become less tolerable. Deficit thinking (see Valencia, 1997) has pervaded and undermined both private and public mentalities about "dropouts" for far too long. As a result, efforts to create systemic change are often thwarted by virtue of the fact that the overwhelming stigma is that "dropouts" are to blame for their circumstances and decisions to depart not the system. In this way, deficit thinking continues to be a silent, hegemonic killer of potentially beneficial educational research, responses, and reform related to dropout intervention and prevention.

In light of the contention presented here that further investigation into systemic issues would prove beneficial to the field, the researcher firmly acknowledges that it would be remiss, not to mention naïve, to advance the belief that schools are totally to blame for the ongoing dropout crisis. To take a system-blame approach would merely invert the current dominant posture and discount the fact that there is indeed a level of responsibility that must be shouldered by the individuals who decide on leaving the schools. Unfortunately, the longstanding trend in policy and research has been to place the onus on the individual by placing blame in the direction of some endogenous characteristic(s). More recently, however, research has begun to uplift the notion that some duality of responsibility exists in overcoming the dropout problem (Gallagher, 2002; Garcia & Guerra, 2003; Lunenburg, 2000; Wehlage et al., 1989). Unfortunately, while some theoreticians argue this point, the primary context for public policy and mainstream discussions related to the issues (and potential resolutions) remain heavily weighted with deficit thinking.

Breaking away from the aforementioned dominant order, this research project seeks to bring about a more balanced perspective by seeking to gain insights into systemic issues from the students who have left ("dropped out of") traditional school systems. Given the abundance of research that has reviewed student-related variables correlated with dropping out, this research project purposefully aims to draw upon the experiences and reflections of the so-called "dropouts" in an attempt to reveal some of the school-related reasons that contributed to the students' decisions to leave. To reiterate, the intent of the research project is not to accuse schools and exempt students. It

is hoped that this research will allow for a dialogue to take place among students that will reveal thematic points of interest that might be addressed on an institutional level. It is, after all, at the institutional level where more effective change can be directly made. This point is emphasized by Wehlage and Rutter (1987), who argue that "although schools can do nothing about students' SES or innate ability, important contributing factors to [dropping] out that are under the control of the school may be modified to change the school conditions of marginal students" (p. 73).

Indeed, a great deal of quantitative research has been conducted around dropout issues. As a result an array of characteristics related to individuals, schools, home environment, and other variables have been identified, empirically researched, and correlated to the dropout dilemma. While the vast majority of data comes from quantitative studies, a smaller body of qualitative research has also been completed over several recent years. Noticeably however, the gathering and interpretation of qualitative data is lacking in comparison to the amount of quantitative research that has been completed. Unmistakably, a paucity of this research attempts to take an in-depth look into the viewpoints of the students referred to as "dropouts" in order to gain insights into the institutional influences that may lead to their decisions to leave.

In terms of the quantitative models, while the various forms of survey research and other quantitative methods provide empirical data, they tend to operate on an impersonal level by looking "at" the student(s). Not only this, the multiple correlates that have been ascertained from quantitative research pose some potential interpretive dangers in that the variables espoused may actually be symptoms rather than causes of the

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dropout problem. The axiom that correlation does not imply causality reverberates ever so clearly as one begins to more seriously consider the fact that much credibility has been given to research correlates in response to the urgent need to abolish the high school early school leaver problem. This is seen in many school districts as programs in response to dropout issues tend to primarily be developed in response to these common variables and correlates without giving pause to consider that such programs may be treating symptoms versus the actual root causes of the problem (Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair & Christenson, 2003). To this point, the reality of the usefulness of quantitative research methods with regard to dropout research is aptly summed up by the affirmation that "unfortunately, these popular techniques are sometimes inadequate in meeting information needs of decision makers" (Krueger, 1994, p. 3).

The unfortunate truth is that in matters pertaining to early school departure, qualitative research seems both underutilized and underrated. Even though this form of research provides opportunities for gaining a greater depth of insight, qualitative research has predominately taken a backseat to quantitative research within this arena. Of utmost importance to this research project is the identification of the perceptions held by the very students who decided to drop out of school early. This is essential because these students can provide a clarity and depth of insight that has not yet been fully captured. One useful method of obtaining pertinent information is by running a series of focus groups with recovered dropouts, students who have re-enrolled into school.

The focus group context has been selected to carry out this research because it provides a perfect opportunity for elaboration of meaning. It, in fact, may be one of the best means of gaining

deeper insight. This point is clearly articulated by Bloor et al. (2001) who reveal:

> The situation of the focus group, in principle and with fair wind, can provide
>
> occasion and stimulus for collectivity members to articulate those normally
>
> unarticulated normative assumptions. The group is a socially legitimated
>
> occasion for participants to engage in 'retrospective introspection', to attempt
>
> collectively to tease out previously taken for granted assumptions. This teasing
>
> out may only be partial and it may be disputatious, but it may yield up as much
>
> rich data on group norms as long periods of ethnographic fieldwork…But in
>
> respect of that one limited objective—the study of group norms—focus groups
>
> should be the sociological method of choice, providing concentrated and detailed
>
> information on an area of group life which is only occasionally, briefly and
>
> allusively available to the ethnographer over months and years of fieldwork. (p. 6)

Focus groups have been totally underutilized in educational research of this nature, yet

the method is so practically useful. Given the amount of quantitative research that has

been previously completed and the corresponding generalizations intimated, this method

provides a perfect venue for providing meaningful clarifications. Focus groups, as

Krueger (1994) explains, "provide a richness of data…they tap into real-life interactions

of people and allow the researcher to get in touch with participants' perceptions,

attitudes, and opinions in a way that other procedures do not allow" (p. 238).

Via the use of focus groups this research project seeks to illuminate potential

institutional-related precursors and contributors to early school departure. The data as

collected from recovered dropout students is hoped to provide provocative insights into

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the perceptions of students regarding the dropout dilemma. Ultimately it is hoped that a shift in perspective from student-oriented to school-oriented revelations as to why students decide to leave early will be provided through the employment of this methodology.

Of paramount interest are the answers to the three questions in particular: (1) what do students dislike about school; (2) what factors about the school lead to the students' decisions to drop out; and, (3) what motivated the students to return to school? In terms of the first question, dropout literature reveals that student-reported reasons for leaving school regularly describe "disliking school" as the number one reason for leaving (Ekstrom et al., 1987; Orr, 1987; Tanner, Krahn, and Hartnagel, 1995). Strangely however, these studies lack further clarification of what the students actually mean by this expressed "dislike." For that reason it is prudent to delve into the actual perceptions of the dropout victims in order to gain greater depth of insight into what they specifically disliked about school.

Secondly, this research project will be guided by the desire to address issues related to the students' perceptions of the role their former schools played in their decision to leave school prior to graduating. Not many studies have approached an investigation of student perceptions regarding such systemic issues to date. Hopefully, therefore, the discussion will reveal a more comprehensive perspective, uncovering school climate, school policy, and student support program issues for example. By gaining insights into student perceptions of reasons that contributed to their decisions to leave, we may gain more direct cues as to how the environments of our schools might be

adjusted not only fit the needs of mainstream students, but also students considered at risk of leaving schools early. As Orr (1987) puts it, "by learning why students leave, it has been reasoned we can more ably design programs that will help them stay" (p.1).

Third, and finally, is the question that seeks to find reasons that lead the former dropouts to return to school. It is a fact that a percentage of students who drop out of school later return, but little information has been sought from those returnees about the motivating forces that lead to their decisions to return. By reflecting on motivational forces that are common to former dropouts, valuable insights may be obtained that may create a better understanding for all parties involved in the dropout intervention, prevention, and recovery process. Teachers, counselors, administrators, board members, and parents alike can gain valuable insights by taking into account the perspectives of the students who have been recovered.

In summary, much of the existing literature looks "at" students and focuses on a a developed set of internally-prescribed student characteristics (e.g., SES, pregnancy, work, grade retention, poor academic performance, dislike for school, etc.) that place students at risk of dropping out. While research often identifies and focuses on characteristics that are considered to make students "at risk" of dropping out of school, examination of factors that make schools "at risk" of assisting students in dropping out is less common. Supik and Johnson (1999) urge that "what is needed is a more accurate picture of why students drop out of school, [which] should include school characteristics that place students at risk of dropping out…" (p. 18). In doing so a more inclusive paradigm and approach to resolving early school departure issues may be unveiled.

Others too have highlighted the eminent value of this kind of proactive shift in research focus declaring its enhanced potential for gaining more useful insights. Gary Wehlage and Robert Rutter, two forerunners in research related to dropouts, proclaimed the need for such a shift in research perspective almost two decades ago. They stated, "Since traditional research has tended to identify characteristics least amenable to change, the focus of new research might better be directed toward understanding the institutional character of schools and how this affects the potential dropout" (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987, p. 72). In response to this notion, this study seeks to identify specific aspects about the school environment that may have the propensity of contributing to students' decisions to leave, or that simply may not have been supportive enough to sustain their enrollment.

Finally, the students involved in the proposed research can potentially provide another important source of information. As recovered dropouts the participants can reveal prevalent factors related to their motivation to return to school. Understanding reasons why students opt to return to school may be just as important as understanding why they opt to leave. Therefore, this research project also seeks to articulate reasons why former dropouts return to complete secondary school. These insights will contribute to the field by surveying systemic contributions that lead to decisions to drop out by elaborating on the existing predominant paradigm that tends to blame the leaver.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

The History of Early School Departure

One of the greatest challenges to face educators and educational institutions revolves around the question of how to keep students enrolled through high school graduation. The fact that early school departure is no new phenomenon (Altenbaugh, Engel & Martin, 1995; Wehlage & Rutter, 1987) clearly speaks to the longevity of it as a leading concern within the field of education. Robledo Montecel, Cortez and Cortez (2004) further argue that "the problem is one that has been long unresolved or inadequately addressed in communities over many decades" (p. 170). In fact, related literature reveals that the high school dropout dilemma is more than a century old. In retrospect it may even be that the task of keeping kids in school could arguably be viewed as what might have been the most serious challenge of 20th century education. Although some gains have been made solutions to the long legacy of early school leaving continue to elude educators even today.

Historical data provides confirmation of the legacy of early school departure. A brief review of common dropout statistics cited in the literature reveals that the phenomenon spans more than one hundred years, while clearly revealing the long lasting and continuing nature of the problem. Several reports of statistics reflecting the circumstances at the turn of the twentieth century and beyond have been provided in the literature giving an interesting account for the longstanding phenomenon of early school departure. Unfortunately, many early reports of these data do not provide information

related to data collection methods (e.g., census data) nonetheless a clear picture of a long legacy of early school departure is made evident. To begin Altenbaugh, Engel, and Martin (1995) provide the following account:

> School leaving represents more than a late twentieth-century phenomenon, existing since the inception of the common schools in the nineteenth century and circumventing compulsory education laws. History sheds a very different light on this experience. In 1900, 90 percent of students did not complete high school; by 1940 this figure had decreased to 76 percent. School leaving did not fall below 50 percent until the 1950s, and reached its lowest point during the sixties, with 12 percent in 1967. By 1970, however, that figure rose to 17 percent… (p. 19)

A concurring review by Wehlage and Rutter (1987) reveals:

> In 1900, for example, about 90 percent of the male youth in this country did not receive a high school diploma. By 1920 the non-completion rate for males was still 80 percent, and it was not until the 1950s that the dropout rate fell below 50 percent. By the mid to late 1960s the dropout rate reached its low point, and since then the rate for early school leaving has risen (p. 70).

"In the 1980's…national statistics indicate that between 25 and 30 percent of each year's high school cohort [italics added] dropped out before graduating (Roderick, 1993, p.3). These rates of high school dropouts remained unchanged and relatively stable through the 1980s (Mann, 1987; Wehlage and Rutter, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1989).

Recent data produced by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) [see Appendix A] provides an opportunity to review the trend across the 1960s through 2001.

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As measured by a statistic known as the "status dropout rate," an annual dropout measure further explained later in this document, the data reveals a general trend towards a decrease in the dropout rate with only slight fluctuations. The total dropout rate moved from a high 27.2 to a low 10.7 percent during a forty-year period of time. By 2001 the status dropout rate for students of ages 16 to 24 years old is noted as 10.7 percent.

While a good source of general data, unfortunately, the use of such national averages when reflecting on these issues can sometimes soften perceptions and distort the realities that exist from one school district (or community) to another. As a result dangerously high levels of ignorance may abound and deceitful half-truths may proliferate, leaving students and other key stakeholders in the dark. Hahn, Danzberger, and Lefkowitz (1987) describe such potentially pernicious effects, stating that "statistical manipulations have the effect of trivializing a significant social and educational problem" (p. 10). For example, a classic scenario found in the literature, reveals that dropout rates of at least 40 percent and approaching 50 percent were disclosed for some of the nation's high schools although lower national averages were reported (Hahn, Danzberger, and Lefkowitz, 1987; Valenzuela, 1999; Wehlage and Rutter, 1987; Wehlage et al., 1989). Sadly, similar disparities still exist in some communities today. Often the high schools with these more extreme rates are found in neighborhoods that have particular demographics, such as low socioeconomic status. Indeed, the venomous and far reaching tentacles of the dropout epidemic are further exacerbated by a review of the dropout statistics by distinct demographic variables.

It was during the 1980s dropout research renaissance that Fine and Rosenberg (1984) argued that "the rates and reasons vary profoundly according to social class, ethnicity, race, and gender" (p. 26). The truth of the matter is that the dropout dilemma has no boundaries when it comes to race, gender, and socioeconomic status. Even so, the data continues to reflect the fact that those who are either ethnic minority group members, male, and/or considered a member of the lower socioeconomic status group, disproportionately leave school early. The same holds true today as it did twenty years ago and beyond, and evidence of such disparities is located in data provided by the NCES (2005) [see Appendix A].

One striking feature about the data related to the dropout data by sex is that other than in 1970, men have persistently shown higher dropout rates than women. Rates have steadily declined for women since 1960, going from a high of 26.7 percent in 1960 to a low of 9.3 percent in 2001. Male dropout rates also show steady decline from a high of 27.2 percent in 1960 to a low of 10.7 percent in 2001 with the exception of a slight increase in 1997 that peaked in 1998. These are the only data that reflect a higher percent of dropouts who were women. Other than in 1970, a slightly higher percent of men have persistently left high school earlier than women. The NCES (2005) also provides a summary of dropout rates by ethnicity.

Of special note in terms of the "dropouts by ethnicity" data is the blatant and consistent discrepancy found between the percent of Hispanic and White students. Fluctuating between a high of 23.8 percentage points in 1980 to a low of 17.7 percentage points in 1997 (only to rise again and level off at 19.7 percentage points by 2001) the gulf

that separates the number of Hispanic students who chose to leave school early in comparison to their White counterparts is absolutely staggering. The devastating truth about the disproportionate figures of early school departure is further amplified when one considers the fact that the data reported are a reflection of the percent of persons 16 – 24 years old within a given ethnicity. Sadly, the data reveals that close to one-third of the Hispanic persons 16 – 24 years old made the decision to leave school early between 1980 and 1998. Meanwhile, between 1999 and 2001 more than a quarter of Hispanic students 16 – 24 years old left school early each year.

Similarly, the percent of Black students within this age group opting to leave school early is much greater than that of White students. While Hispanic dropout percents are by far the highest, Black high school dropout data reveal a 3.6 percentage point difference between White and Black dropouts by 2001. In 1970 the difference was much greater (14.7 percentage points) however these data included persons of Hispanic origin within both the White and Black categories. As in the case with Hispanic students, the trend of higher dropout rates for Black students continues to persist. As previously mentioned, the data are more discouraging when viewed within ethnicity because the national population figures are so much lower for blacks and Hispanics, consequently the numbers of these populations that decide to leave school early are disproportionately greater.

A recently released study of the crisis of high incidences of early departure from high schools nationwide that was conducted by The Civil Rights Project at Harvard

University and The Urban Institute reported staggering evidence surrounding the dilemma. Within the report, Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson (2004) report

> Nationally high school graduation rates are low for all students, with only an estimated 68% of those who enter 9th grade graduating with a regular diploma in 12th grade. But…they are substantially lower for most minority groups, and particularly for males. According to the calculations used in this report, in 2001, only 50% of all black students, 51% of Native American students, and 53% of all Hispanic students graduated from high school. Black, Native American, and Hispanic males fare even worse: 43%, 47%, and 48% respectively. (p. 9)

With regard to these ominous nationwide disparities this report also challenges the notion that such disproportionate levels of high school completion are solely an urgent educational issue. Rather, Orfield, Losen, Wald, and Swanson (2004) draw attention to the fact that this situation must too be addressed as a "civil rights crisis" (p. 10).

Early School Departure in Texas

As was the case in most states, the 1980s became a time of self-examination in Texas with regard to public education. However, as described by Romo and Falbo (1996), "when educational issues began to be a concern for Texas politicians during the early 1980s they were more interested in raising academic standards than in reducing dropout rates" (p. 4). As was the case elsewhere in the country, early statewide initiatives were not a matter of dropout reform; but rather, initiatives were mainly catalyzed at that time by a national reform that Chester Finn called the "dawn of the excellence

movement." Describing antecedent activities that lead to the national trends in

educational reform that rippled from state to state during the 1980s, Finn (1991) offers

the following account:

> In the mid-1970s, America's national confidence wavered…On the education
>
> front, the College Board disclosed in 1975 that the average score on its celebrated
>
> Scholastic Aptitude Test had been falling for the previous eleven years. "More
>
> than any other single factor," historian Diane Ravitch recounts, "the public's
>
> concern about the score declines touched off loud calls for instruction in 'the
>
> basics' of reading, writing, and arithmetic." Data from international achievement
>
> tests also indicated that American youngsters lagged behind those of other lands
>
> in such core subjects as math and science. Colleges reported weak academic
>
> preparation among many freshmen. (p.9)

Heightened levels of awareness and concern with public education were further

exacerbated by the 1983 publishing and release of "A Nation At Risk: The Imperative for

Educational Reform" by the National Commission on Excellence in Education. In turn

the Texas 68th Legislature responded full throttle.

 Under the 68th Legislature new laws aimed at raising the bar for education in

Texas were enacted. Yet, the hasty resolve of lawmakers to enhance academic standards

did not come without backlash. Unexpected adverse effects on dropout rates were

believed to have emerged as one byproduct of the activity spawned by these laws.

Unsurprisingly concerns began mounting quickly. In the midst of statewide concerns

regarding the fate of students who were leaving school early, a comprehensive dropout

study—the first of its kind within the state—was conducted. "*The Texas School Dropout Survey Project* (TSDSP) was initiated in order to establish an information base for analyzing the dropout problem in Texas and to reformulate recommendations to the 69th Legislature based upon research findings. The Project was mandated by House Bill 72 and was funded in the Spring of 1986 by the Texas Department of Community Affairs (TDCA) in collaboration with the Texas Education Agency (TEA)" (Cardenas, Robledo, and Supick, 1986, p. 1). The recommendations of this report in tandem with the widespread sense of urgency being pushed by many local school districts resulted in a shift in legislative positioning. Accordingly state legislators responded by developing new policies, which lead to the state's first laws directly related to the early school departure dilemma.

Supick and Johnson (1999) describe the response stating, "As a result of the studies findings, recommendations by TDCA and TEA and discussions at several state and regional dropout-related conferences, Rep. Ramon Martinez and Sen. Chet Edwards of Houston drafted House Bill 1010, which became law in 1986" (p.11). In addition to this account, other key related circumstances have been chronicled. For example, Romo and Falbo (1996) provide the following summary of critical events:

> After 1984, school districts complained about the impact of the new education laws on dropout rates. They argued that many students were giving up rather than knuckling down to meet the new standards, and consequently, dropout rates were increasing. In response, the Texas Legislature enacted a dropout law in 1987. Among other things, the law required school districts to report dropout rates

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according to a common statewide definition, to create a dropout prevention plan, and to designate someone in the district as a dropout coordinator. In addition, the law required each district to identify students "at risk" of dropping out according to the common statewide definition and to notify the students' parents of their status and of the programs and/or services which could help the "at risk" student (p.4).

Thus the initial formal action plan to diminish the number of students who opt to leave school prior to receiving a diploma was ushered into existence. The model, unfortunately, was built on a foundation of deficit thinking (Valencia, 1997) as revealed through the focus on students designated "at risk". Nonetheless the movement to lower early student departure was formally initiated.

Between the time of inception of the law and the turn of the millennium (the 1987-88 through 1998-99 school years) statewide dropout data reflect a steady decrease in the annual dropout rate, moving from a high off 6.7 percent in 1987-88 to a low of 1.6 percent in 1998-99 (Legislative Budget Board, State Auditor's Office and TEA, 2000). The "2001 State Accountability Data Tables" (TEA, 2001a) reveal that this trend continued indicating that the annual dropout rate for grades 7-12 during the 1999-2000 school year reached 1.3 percent. In terms of the state of education in Texas, at the onset of the new millennium state reports revealed that:

Out of 1,794,521 students who attended Grades 7-12 in Texas public schools during the 1999-2000 school year, 23,457 students, or 1.3 percent, were reported to have dropped out. This was a decrease of 15.0 percent in the number of

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dropouts, and the first decline in the dropout rate in three years…The statewide

annual dropout rate for grades 9-12 was 1.8 percent. Out of 244,777 students in

the class of 2000 Grade 9 cohort, 80.7 percent graduated, 4.8 percent received a

General Education Development (GED) certificate, and 7.3 percent continued

school the following year. The four-year longitudinal dropout rate was 7.2

percent. (TEA, 2001b)

From the TEA (2001a) data one can easily discern that of the 23,457 students who left

school early, 19.9 percent were African American; 53.5 percent were Hispanic; and 24.9

percent were White. This is of special note due to the fact that during that time, African

American, Hispanic, and White students represented 14.2%, 36.7%, and 46.1% of the

total student population respectively, revealing that a disproportionate number of African

American and Hispanic students opted to leave school early. This factor tends to remain

an unfortunate hallmark of Texas dropout data.

In comparison to the data reported by the TEA, a recent publication by the NCES

(2004) reports that that the Event Dropout Rates for students in grades 9 -12 in Texas was

5% in 1999-2000 and 4.2% in 2000-2001. Those two years are the only two for which

the event dropout rate is reported for Texas by the NCES, because prior to 1999 Texas

did not report dropout rates in a manner that was consistent with the NCES definition.

Beyond a focus on the past and current state of affairs of early school departure in Texas,

an inspection of forecasts about the future is in order.

In terms of the future of education in Texas the outlook is bleak at best if the

current early school departure trends continue. Even given the steady advances purported

by the state in terms of the reduced number of students that are considered dropouts, a pending dilemma remains. One stirring examination of the future of Texas, entitled "Texas Challenge: Population Change and the Future of Texas," includes ominous population projections related to expected changes in elementary and high school demographics. Based on analyses of population patterns Murdock et al. (1997) provide several population projections that illuminate the immediate need for the state to prepare for vastly changing population dynamics. Among other important changes, they project that "higher rates of growth in [specialized educational] programs [will] result from the fact that they involve proportions of minority group members and minority enrollment is growing more rapidly than that for whites" (Murdock et al., 1997, p. 249). One of the specialized educational program areas expected to incur increased enrollment projections is that of "High School Dropout" programs.

According to their analysis, for example, Murdock et al. (1997) report that the numbers of ethnic minority students enrolled in high school dropout programs are expected to increase tremendously between 1990 and 2030. Specifically the authors suggest that Black student enrollment in high school dropout programs will elevate from 8,522 to 12,562 during that time. Hispanic student enrollment is expected to increase from 21,861 to 63,051, while "Other" ethnic minority group members are projected to increase from 872 to 3,300 across that same time period. All together the expectation is that the total population will increase from 49,394 to 100,255, which represents a 103 percent change in total population. The percent change in high school dropout program

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population expected for the Black, Hispanic, and "Other" ethnic groups are projected as 47.4, 188.4, and 278.0 respectively.

Changing Workforce Trends

In the face of improved national and statewide dropout statistics, the relevance of the dropout epidemic looms even larger today than one hundred years ago given the changing trends in the workforce and connections between education and career development. "As late as 1900, 61 percent of the United States labor force were employed in unskilled jobs…therefore in 1900 uneducated youth were able to contribute constructively to the economy" (Sinclair and Ghory, 1987). In present-day America this is no longer the case. With the decline of an agrarian-based society and an increase in a technology-based, global society, undereducated youth will most likely enter and remain a part of the ranks of the underemployed or unemployed. As pointed out by Wehlage et al. (1989) "despite impressive gains in school completion, the current dropout rate signifies a serious social problem because of the scarcity of good paying jobs open to a high school dropout" (p. 30). This statement was made over two decades ago, but it perhaps holds even truer now than it did then in terms of the inevitable plight of the twenty-first century early school leaver.

The critical link between education and work became a major national focal point during the 1980s. As previously mentioned, it is during this time that education became a salient public policy issue as the advent of the call for educational reform was spawned by the publishing and circulation of *A Nation at Risk: The Imperative of Education*

Reform (Hahn, Danzberger, and Lefkowitz, 1987; Roderick, 1993). Within this document several reasons that were perceived to have weakened education for American youth were highlighted. One clear focal point of the report was that of directing attention towards the need for the country to maintain a competitive edge in a newly emerging world order. Specifically under a portion of the report subtitled "The Risk," the National Commission on Excellence in Education (1983) provides the following commentary:

> "The world is indeed one global village. We live among determined, well-educated, and strongly motivated competitors. We compete with them for international standing and markets, not only with products but also with the ideas of our laboratories and neighborhood workshops. America's position in the world may have once been reasonably secure with only a few exceptionally well-trained men and women. It is no longer. (p. 6)

The Commission (1982) further urged that "in order to keep and improve on the slim competitive edge we still retain in world markets, we must dedicate ourselves to reform our educational system for the benefit of all" (p.7). The report continued by outlining the panoply of indicators of risk deduced by the Commission and ended by offering multiple recommendations and strategies for change. All at once the nation had been provided with just cause to reinvigorate education in order to correct what was commonly referred to as "a rising tide of mediocrity." As one might expect local concerns about workforce demands were simultaneously elevated. Ultimately these matters catalyzed statewide educational reform, but as previously mentioned the reform movement

negatively impacted dropout rates. The reform movement also had economic

consequences for the state.

Some of the earliest documentation provided to Texas lawmakers related to

economic impacts came from the TSDSP. As a part of the TSDSP the Intercultural

Developmental Research Association (IDRA) conducted a cost-benefits analysis in an

attempt to quantify some of the primary economic impacts of the Texas dropout dilemma.

Through this process several costs to the state were identified as consequences of early

school departure. As categorically identified, early school leaving was posited to impact

society through lost wages and tax revenues, increased social welfare service,

unemployment, and crime and prison costs, all totaling approximately 17.0 billion in

losses (Cardenas, Robledo, and Supick, 1986; Supick and Johnson, 1999). Given that

these figures were developed nearly 20 years ago and based on an estimated count of

86,000 early school leavers, it is frightful to consider the estimated costs to contemporary

society. In a more recent study by Supick and Johnson (1999) that "calculated the

estimated total earnings and tax losses to the state of Texas due to school attrition…from

1985-86 to 1997-98", a cost to the state of approximately $319 billion was reported.

In retrospect, when total losses are considered (in terms of the numbers of those

who do not complete high school and the concomitant costs to them and society), what

initially may be considered good progress—the lowered dropout rates—seems to be a

less significant gain and a premature judgment. The fact of the matter is that the numbers

tell a sad story about an ongoing dilemma too significant to praise the progress made to

date. In the final analysis much work remains to be completed in order to create better opportunities for success among students of all backgrounds.

One good place to start is with changing the notion that problems exist within the students and that they are ultimately to blame for their early school departure. While the data display that larger proportions of particular groups of ethnic minorities tend to leave school prior to receiving diplomas this phenomenon by no means implies that fault necessarily rests within those students. No cause can be duly assigned without critical regard. Unfortunately the dropout figures tend to be so overwhelming that it may seem almost justifiable to assign causality to variables such as home environment, family values, academic deficits, and the like.   However, any such determination is more a matter of what Leahey (1992) refers to as "folk psychology" or "pseudoscience" than truth.

As applied to the dropout dilemma one important element about folk psychology or pseudoscience is that it tends be characterized by "deficit thinking." This theory of school failure is advanced by Valencia (1997), who explains "the deficit thinking model, at its core, is an endogenous theory–positing that the student who fails in school does so because of internal deficits or deficiencies" (p.2). The perilous nature of deficit thinking has also been articulated within the literature by others (Garcia & Guerra, 2004; Robledo Montecel, Cortez & Cortez, 2004; Thomas & Sillen, 1972). What is clear is that the notions propagated by this model are longstanding and deeply rooted in the heritage of the American education system. An investigation of how early school leavers have been

defined in the literature and the meanings/uses of the term "dropout" further illuminate this notion of deficit thinking.

Defining the "Dropout"

An ongoing problem with dialogues surrounding dropout issues is the identification of an operational definition of the term "dropout". Interestingly, due to a lack of a single prominently accepted definition the literature reveals a variety of interpretations and explanations that fit particular research and/or policy agendas. While the context of discussion can sometimes dictate use of a particular operational definition, at the most fundamental level the term "dropout" describes an individual who has not completed their education through the secondary level. As explained by Orr (1987), "a dropout is a student who withdraws from school without a high school diploma and without enrolling elsewhere" (p.1). Even so, the ensuing brief review reveals a few additional common ways that the term "dropout" has been denoted in the literature.

Morrow (1987) provides an insightful acknowledgement regarding the role of particular agencies in the formulation of the dropout lexicon, asserting that:

Many definitions of dropouts are written by national and state agencies. These definitions commonly list reasons why students withdraw from school; selected reasons constitute "dropout," others "non-dropout." A review of "reasons for dropping out" used by school districts as their working definition of a dropout, and the more formal textbook definitions, suggest three criteria for a definition: (1) Is the student actively enrolled? (2) If not, has the enrollment been formally

transferred to another legitimate institution? (3) Has the student earned a high

school diploma or its equivalent? A school's dropouts are those students, at one

time formally enrolled, for whom all three questions are answered in the negative.

(p.40)

These criteria while overarching and fairly direct provide a general framework from

whence other denotations are spawned. Often the dropout definitions that emerge from

these criteria generally contain more conditions and additional levels of specificity.

For example, a set of five criteria that clearly emerge from the three basic criteria

revealed above. Kronick and Hargis (1990) reveal that the 1988 Federal Register defined

a dropout as a student who: "was enrolled in the district at some time during the previous

school year; was not enrolled at the beginning of the current regular school year; has not

graduated or completed a program of studies by the maximum age established by the

state; has not transferred to another public school district, or to a non-public school, or to

a state-approved education program; and, has not left school because of illness or school-

approved absence" (p.61). This definition generally serves as a guidepost for state

agencies that often impose additional defining categories and criteria. Essentially at the

state level higher degrees of specificity are interjected into the definitional process.

TEA, as an example, categorizes students that decide not to continue their

education through high school graduation using what are commonly known as "Leaver

Codes." These "codes" [see Appendix B] are a comprised of a host of reasons that might

classify student based on the reason or reasons the student left school. According to state

criteria some of the codes explicated within the document are deemed as excusable

reasons for early departure (see Legislative Budget Board, State Auditor's Office, & Texas Education Agency, 2000), while others are inexcusable. Also problematic to this process is the fact that the system fails to fully account for the myriad reasons for leaving and the perceptions of designated school staff become the final judgment of a student's actual reason for leaving.

As a result it has been fervently argued that the current system consistently and seriously undercounts the true number of dropouts (Cardenas, Robledo & Supik, 1986; Supik & Johnson, 1999). This is believed to be largely due to the fact that among other things, the state's dropout count does not include students who have received a GED certificate or students who have completed all high school requirements except for the state mandated exit test. Thusly, a major pitfall of the Texas leaver-code system is that it may inherently reduce dropout counts by essentially explaining away reasons that students fail to complete secondary school.

In addition to the aforementioned lack of uniformity in how a student is identified as a dropout, different measurements of the dilemma exist. Fortunately, there are only a few prominent methods of measuring dropout rates. "Three measures of the dropout rate that are available over time include: the number of graduates compared to the population 17 years of age in any given year; the number of public high school graduates compared with public school ninth-grade enrollment four years earlier; and the percentage of 18- and 19-year olds with a high school diploma or equivalency degree" (Roderick, 1993, p. 3). Beyond these three measures, three kinds of dropout rates are used in the literature. The types of dropout rates include: *event* dropout rates, which measure the proportion of

students who drop out in a single year without completing high school; *status* dropout

rates, which measure the proportion of the population who have not completed high

school and are not enrolled at one point in time, regardless of when they dropped out;

and, *cohort* dropout rates, which measure what happens to a single group of students over

a period of time (West, 1991; National Center for Education Statistics, 2001a).

The bottom line is that historically "estimates of the number of youth who drop

out are conflicting and inconclusive…[and] schools and communities lack a uniform

definition of what a dropout is and when someone is officially recognized as a dropout"

(Orr, 1987, p.1). Due to this murky legacy, problems and confusion continue to plague

attempts to bring clarity to dropout counts. West (1991) states "this confusion exists

because the federal government, state educational agencies, and local educational

agencies do not use comparable methods to compute [dropout rates]" (p. 9).

Undoubtedly making fair decisions based on such data or comparisons across data

presents a difficult chore in the midst of inconsistent definitions. Still other troubles

abound in deciphering dropout literature.

Meanings and Uses of the Term "Dropout"

To return to a point introduced briefly at the onset of this discussion, students who

leave school do so under diverse circumstances and conditions. As a result, it has been

noted within the literature that the term "dropout" has been used to identify a variety of

early school leavers (Morrow, 1987; West, 1991). The fact that multiple connotations

exist for this designation presents a tricky challenge. In most instances dropouts are

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described in the literature via terms that have been created to point out specific encounters, characterizations, or circumstances, but no universal language currently exists. For now, the effect has been an establishment of dropout jargon that remains void of clarity while attempting to capture the essence of the nuances involved in early school departure. As could be expected the troublesome task of reviewing the more common expressions leaves one primarily with equivocal semantic divisions, while in some cases a fair level of understanding results. Examples of some of the more common terminology found in the early lexicon of dropout literature includes terms like: "pushouts," "dropbacks," "stopouts," "capable dropouts," and "estranged youth" among others [see Appendix C].

Sadly, in the midst of definitional inconsistencies, the dropout research previously completed has furnished forth most of the generalizations (stigmas) that exist today. As promoted by Wehlage (1989) preference is given in this research project to the use of the term *school leaver*. This term is preferable because it represents an all-encompassing label that includes combinations of the various aforementioned school-leaving experiences. Furthermore, the term "school leaver" avoids negative, almost pathological, connotations associated with the dropout label. Meanwhile, the term *dropout* implies deficit thinking. Blame is designated within the student, when in fact it could be any number of home and/or school experiences, peer pressures, social or economic demands, or even other unnamed circumstances have shaped student decisions to leave school early. An identifier that allows for a less indicting stance in the matter of early school

departure must become more prolific given the multiple factors involved in student decisions to leave.

Reasons for Leaving School

Over the past twenty-five years the completion of numerous investigations of the dropout phenomenon both within the United States and abroad have been completed. The research has taken many quantitative and qualitative forms, including the use of surveys, questionnaires, longitudinal data, ethnographies, and interviews to name a few. As a result of an intense and continual focus on the pervasiveness of the high school dropout dilemma, research proposes many factors that influence early school departure. Furthermore, it is worth noting that because "[t]here are multiple causes of dropping out," as noted by McDill, Natriello, and Pallas (1985), "…dropouts may report more than one reason for dropping out" (p. 418).

Much of the research on the topic of high school dropouts primarily provides a laundry list of commonly identified endogenous reasons that are purported as leading causes for early school departure. This is particularly true of the majority of early research on the topic of high school completion. According to Anisef and Andres (1996) "the 1980s introduced a large body of literature on the topic of students at risk of dropping out that clearly and consistently delineated variables at the individual, familial, school, community, and societal levels most predictive of early school withdrawal" (p.93).

For example, Ekstrom et al. (1987) conclude that previous research indicates that high school attrition is related to background (SES; race/ethnicity), achievement (low scores on standardized tests; low grades) and attitudes (dissatisfied with school; no post-secondary education plans), and individual behaviors (non-academic class enrollment; delinquency and truancy; employment; pregnancy). Additional common reasons given for dropping out of school include low socioeconomic status (Kronick and Hargis, 1990; Wehlage and Rutter, 1987); poor grades, dislike for school, alienation from peers, marriage or pregnancy, and employment (Hahn, Danzberger, and Lefkowitz, 1987; McDill, Natriello, and Pallas, 1985; McDill, Natriello, and Pallas, 1987; West 1991).

"Other significant factors that have been associated with leaving school include level of involvement in school activities, ability to read, social skills, and appropriate age for grade" (Kronick and Hargis, 1990, p. 62). Beyond these, additional variables unveiled include attendance, delinquency, family problems, and suspension/ expulsion (West, 1991). Like the previously mentioned variables, none of these factors are necessarily discrete causes in and of themselves. However, many of they aforementioned influences have been interpreted as such.

In truth while these common reasons are often treated as causes, they are in all actuality correlates (Kronick and Hargis, 1990) associated with the school departure phenomenon. Orr (1985) reports, for example, that "while poor academic performance and low-income background make a student more likely to leave school, they are not the causes [italics added] of dropping out" (p. 5). This and related cautions serve as staunch reminders that it is misguided reasoning to presume that correlation implies causality.

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Nevertheless this fundamental oversight has proven calamitous in that common interpretations of school leaver research often lead to generalizations and stigmas that primarily blame the student for identified shortcomings.

Over the years, as stated by Lehr, Hansen, Sinclair and Christenson (2003), "an appreciation for the complexity of the dropout phenomenon has emerged in the literature" (p. 343). Unlike the flood of studies completed during the 1980's and early 90's, a change in focus from examining problems mostly reflective of student- and/or family-oriented deficits, many recent studies have taken a different approach to the issue. Some have, for example, begun using more student-centered methods to pursue understanding of issues related to the dropout problem via use of research models that include qualitative data collection (Certo, Cauley & Chaflin, 2003; Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Doucette, 2005; Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Franquiz & Salazar, 2004; Gallagher, 2002; Hemmings, 2003; Jodry, Robles-Pina & Nichter, 2004; Miron & Laura, 1998; Roy & Swaminathan, 2002). These studies differ too in that they provide a vantage point on the subject matter from a student perspective by giving voice to the students who are in the midst of the educational dilemma. Findings of these studies have provided additional evidence of reasons why students decide to leave schools as well as variables that create negative versus positive school experiences that may contribute to the problem of early school departure.

Providing opportunities for students to freely relay their observations about schooling has become a primary underlying goal of several recent studies. Ostensibly in doing so the intent is to allow students to become partners in voicing and solving school-

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related concerns. These studies have produced informative results that imply an array of reasons why students may not successfully complete school through high school graduation. Reasons for leaving lifted by this research include variables such as disengagement from school (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; Gallagher, 2002; Miron & Lauria, 1998), lack of school fulfillment of students' need for belonging (Certo, Cauley & Chaflin, 2003), poor relationships with adults in schools (Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Hemmings, 2003; Jodry, Robles-Pena & Nichter, 2004; Roy & Swaminathan, 2002), as well as factors related to curriculum, instruction, and negative school climate and structures (Doucette, 2005).

Similarly, a strand of more recent quantitative studies report results that also contribute broadening understanding of the dropout phenomenon. Several of these studies have also shifted focus to variables that create success for students in schools as opposed to merely focusing on detrimental conditions. This line of research is critical to the dropout conversation in that results from these studies help to shift the focus towards high school success and completion for all students. Meanwhile, such research concurrently provides insight into reasons that students opt to either remain in school or exit school early.

Research of this nature includes studies that focus on student decisions to leave school (or remain) due to: factors that foster academic engagement (Miller-Cribbs, Cronen, Davis & Johnson, 2002); perceptions of school alienation (Brown, Higgins, Pierce Hong & Thoma, 2003); relationships and school environment (May & Copeland, 1998; Saunders & Saunders, 2001; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004); and, school size

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(Alspaugh, 1997). In addition to the contributions of studies such as these, a number of scholars have completed meta-analyses that provide further insight into the nature of dropout prevention. Two such analyses expose examples of additional factors that relate to school dropouts, providing further insight into the importance of multiple factors. More specifically, the studies report findings related to issues regarding: instructional environment, student sense of membership/connectedness, school board policies, and student mentoring (Lunenburg, 2000); and, service delivery changes (e.g., low pupil-teacher ratios, instructional methods, expanded academic skills development programs), improved staff-student relationships, increased respect and consideration for students, and behavior support interventions (Martin, Tobin & Sagai, 2002).

A third analysis of this kind, a review of 45 dropout prevention and intervention studies completed by Lehr, et al. (2003), provides evidence that while many of the interventions were theoretically based "the focus of the interventions has been on effecting change in the student [and that] fewer have attempted to intervene in terms of contextual factors such as…school level influences" (p. 359). Unfortunately, one core finding of this study reiterates the resounding prevalence of deficit thinking found in dropout prevention and intervention strategies, highlighting the longstanding impact of the results of the more prominent early dropout studies that provided a host of indicators reflective of presumed student deficits.

Of related concern is the fact that many of the aforementioned student-focused characteristics have precipitated a popular and commonly used identifier of potential early leavers. In short these frequently cited correlates have converged into a more

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contemporary form of deficit thinking, as students are now classified under the categorization known as "at-risk." Danger lurks behind the "at-risk" concept as a potential primary driving force for dropout research and redirection for many reasons.

Foremost, the use of the term quietly upholds a long-standing tradition of deficit thinking in education. It has already been pointed out that the term is imprecise (Wehlage et al., 1989), and West (1991) provides a discomforting reality check related to this contemporary term asserting:

> The term *at risk* has replaced earlier terms such as *poor*, *culturally deprived*,
> *educationally disadvantaged*, and *unconstitutionally segregated*. The new term at
> risk is a kind of blameless term that suggests that it just happens that some
> students are in danger of dropping out and that no one is responsible for the
> problem. The term *at risk* suggests that the problems are individual ones, while
> the old terms suggest systemic problems affecting entire groups (p. 18).

It is unfortunate that such a characterization has arisen especially since it is argued that "dropping out is not an isolated phenomenon" (Kronick & Hargis, 1990, p. 61). However, the reality is that this longstanding paradigm of deficit thinking has spawned a host of dropout research and reform practices that have climbed to a prominent and unshakable position. As a result, in a stealth-like fashion a model of blaming the victim has become firmly rooted in the dialogues about early school departure.

One element of importance revolves around the fact that the methods by which data has been collected has influenced the proliferation of deficit thinking as made manifest in the generalizations, characterizations, and concepts reported in the majority

of the literature. While researchers have employed both qualitative and quantitative

methods retrieving data via surveys, questionnaires, interviews, and self-report to name a

few popular methods, only recently has the tide begun to change in attempts to broaden

the outlook.   Over the years data related to the dropout phenomenon has been collected

from administrators, teachers, students and parents. However, all in all, the vast majority

of efforts made to research, discuss, and remedy the dilemma via the more prolific forms

of data retrieval processes continue to fall short of providing illuminating the entire story.

While the research paradigm has shifted over the years, a need for more opportunities to

hear from the students about their schooling experiences is needed in order to bring about

a richer and more balanced perspective.

Extended Literature Related to Care and Relationships

Little early school departure research exists that focuses on issues related to

caring and relationships in high schools, because such subject matter did not garner much

attention at the onset of the 'dropout' research movement. These variables have more

recently received attention mostly due to the nature of the majority of the research to

focus on student-related variables. Characteristics of schools and/or the schooling

processes were less likely to appear, therefore it is not surprising that extensive research

around these variables does not exist. On the other hand a number of scholars, not

necessarily engaged in dropout research, had begun looking at issues related to care and

relationships and the general importance of these variables to teaching, learning, and

school climate. In fact, research regarding the importance of care and relationships was a

sentiment echoed by sources from various backgrounds including researchers from the fields of education, sociology, and health care to name a few.

For some the importance of care and relationships in schools began to be argued on the basis of the notion that all humans want to care and be cared for (Comer, 1980; Dasho, Lewis, & Watson, 2001; Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Frabrizio, 2001; Noddings, 1984; Noddings, 1992; Valenzuela, 1999). The positions of these theorists and practitioners stemmed from applications of early notions regarding the need for belonging and attachment theory (Maslow, 1955; Ainsworth, Blehar, Waters, & Wall, 1978; Bowlby, 1988). Across time these notions have further blossomed and are readily apparent today in the context of high school reform. Specifically, the critical role of quality relationships in creating high school success has even emerged as one of the most critical factors found in the framework of many of the most widely accepted current high school reform models that are sweeping across the country. Nationally recognized high school reform models such as that of the Southern Region Education Board (SREB), the International Center for Leadership in Education (ICLE), and the National Association of Secondary School Principals (NASSP) all place school relationships, among other variables, at the heart of transitioning high schools into places where all kids can flourish. A core framework component within each of the programs—High Schools That Work; Rigor, Relevance and Relationships; and Breaking Ranks II, respectively—one finds a clear articulation of the serious importance of relationships in high schools (International Center for Leadership in Education, 2006; NASSP, 2005; Southern Region Education Board, 2006).

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Prior to the onset of current high school reform movement, feminist researcher-practitioner Nell Noddings spent years studying and describing what she called "the ethic of caring" in schools. Her work is important because it helped to establish early understandings about care in schools. It was around the same time that the initial studies regarding early school departure were being published (during the 1980's) that Noddings (1984) was articulating the fact that "everywhere we hear the complaint that 'nobody cares'… [and that] caring is important in itself" (p. 7). While Noddings was challenging researchers and educators to incorporate deeper understandings of the ethic of care in schools, her research was primarily concerned with early childhood and elementary level education. Even with the clues and guidance provided by Noddings, little attention was given to this potential aspect of the high school early departure dilemma within the research or the literature examining the causes of the problem. As previously noted, the majority of research focused on identification of correlates related to dropping out of school. While a scarcity of such early school departure research existed at that time, issues related to care, relationships, and the nature of school environments were pursued on other fronts.

Child psychiatrist James Comer, for example, developed a support structure for schools that holds the establishment of healthy, caring relationships within learning communities in high regard when it comes to creating successful schools. Comer, upon initiating a nationally recognized school reform model in 1968, focused on the facilitation of "interactions that would help the adults in the [school] setting to be predictable and caring so that they would be able to provide guidance and support for children" (Comer,

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Haynes, & Joyner, 1996, p. 7). Still highly regarded today as a promising model, Comer

(2003) advises "that children need to form emotional bonds with their teachers and see

healthy social relationships among adults in their lives to function well in schools" (p.11).

This comprehensive model points directly at the importance of relationship building in

developing care and creating a caring environment within schools. In totality, the Comer

approach to educating youth and adolescents points to the importance of developing care

in schools and related positive expected effects including enhanced attendance and

academic success, improved student motivation, a positive social climate, and promotion

of community engagement among other benefits (Comer, 1980; Comer, Haynes, Joyner,

& Ben-Avie, 1996).

Building on the keystone philosophies of the *ethic of care* (Noddings, 1984;

Noddings, 1992) and its concomitant features, Valenzuela (1999) directly introduced the

principles and related effects of caring and respectful relations in high schools—further

elaborated upon as the Mexican concept of *educación*—into research literature, while

simultaneously articulating the destructive forces of *subtractive schooling* processes

experienced by ethnic minority students daily.   During completion of a multiyear

ethnographic study of Mexican American students in a large urban school district,

Valenzuela identified the schooling process as *subtractive* in that "[it divested the] youth

of important social and cultural resources, leaving them progressively vulnerable to

academic failure" (p. 3). Raising awareness of the role of care in schools while

describing a cycle of miscues regularly encountered between staff and students, the need

to move away from looking at issues considered endogenous to kids towards looking at

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the role that schools play in undermining school success is suggested. Valenzuela draws

several significant conclusions, including the propositions that

(1) Schools are organized formally and informally in ways that fracture cultural and

   ethnic identities, creating social, linguistic, and cultural divisions among the

   students and between the students and staff (p.5); and,

(2) Due to different understandings about how care is revealed, non-Latino teaching

   staff [in the study saw] students as *not caring* about school (based on attention to

   things and ideas – aesthetic caring), while students see teachers as not sufficiently

   caring for them (based on attention to relations and reciprocity – authentic caring)

   (p. 61).

As one of the first studies of its kind surrounding issues of care at the high school level,

this research broached a necessary territory of limited investigation. Since the time of the

publishing of Valenzuela's study, research of related concern has recently sprouted

forward.

With an even greater emphasis now placed on elements of care and relationships

in literature that focuses on school success, it now appears that relationship building is

accepted as an essential foundation to restructuring schools for success. It follows,

therefore, that if such a focus currently exists, related concerns have not been fully

addressed. This issue is more substantial in high schools, where engagement in the levels

of caring relationships commonly found in elementary/middle schools are less likely.

For a multitude of reasons it has become imperative to get the message across to

educators of high school students that "[i]n many ways educating is an act of caregiving,

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regardless of the age of the students" (Goldstein, 1997, p. 3). To be sure, this exhortation finds further substantiation in a multitude of research that points out that students respond positively and learn more when they feel cared for (Collins, 1990; Comer, 2003; Ellis, Small-McGinley, & De Frabrizio, 2001; Kohn, 1996; Noddings, 2003; Valenzuela, 1999). Given the heightened levels of attention now given to the issues of care and relationships in high school, while early school departure literature does not typically feature these variables as contributors to the dilemma, it might be expected that students will project concerns related to the variables of care and/or relationships when provided the opportunity to more directly voice their dislikes.

Conclusion

As prevalent as the early school leaver issue is, solid remedies to the dilemma continue to elude school districts throughout the nation. In part, this could be due to the fact that a majority of the information available about potential school leavers focuses on demographics and other student-centered variables that have been purported to influence students' decisions to dropout. Indisputably many variables and characteristics have been correlated to and acknowledged as valid reasons why students may opt to leave the schools they once attended (Hahn, Danzberger, & Lefkowitz, 1987; Roderick, 1993; West, 1991). However, while demographic trends are often viewed as credible sources of information in determining factors that place students at risk of dropping out, they tend to reflect a paradigm that embodies deficit thinking.

Alternatively, Roderick (1993) implores that "reducing dropout rates also requires that we have a base of knowledge of the manner in which youth's school experiences and

the institutional characteristics of the school he or she attends influences the course of his or her school career" (p. 17). One way of gaining deeper understanding (Wolcott, 1990) is by harnessing the observations and perceptions of the students involved in the process. It has been suggested that the study of human development from an ecological perspective is of critical importance in allowing for understanding in different social contexts (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Gallagher, 2002; Jodry, Lehr et al., 2003; Robles-Pina & Nitcher, 2004) and schools are social contexts quite befitting of such explorations. Unfortunately, due the more dominant research paradigm that has been imposed upon dropout studies, a precious reservoir of information remains somewhat untapped and underutilized.

It is due to this fact, in part, that potential opportunities to broaden insight into the phenomenon by more deeply venturing into and accessing the perceptions of the students who have opted to leave school have been silenced. Noting the importance of contextual factors beginning to emerge in a subtly shifting dropout intervention research paradigm, Lehr et al. (2003) profess that "as the importance of the ecological context in which students placed at risk of dropout are expected to function is increasingly recognized, it is reasonable to expect the development of more interventions focused on the surrounding environment…or relationships" (p. 359). In order to add to the recently broadened perspective-taking horizon in dropout research this study seeks to further gain understanding of student perspectives on high schools and the schooling environment particularly with regard to influences related to their decisions to leave school early.

CHAPTER THREE: METHOD

Participants

The subjects for the study consist of twenty-seven (27) former high school leavers who later opted to reenter a separate high school program—a.k.a. *Keep Kids Charter School* (KKCS)—and who were enrolled in grades 9 through 12 and were in good standing at the time of the study. While student were enrolled in grades 9-12, only students 18 years of age or older were eligible to participate. The participants ranged between 18 (63%) and 19 (37%) years of age, and consisted of sixteen (16) males (59%) and eleven (11) females (41%). Students from three ethnic groups— four (4) African American (15%), thirteen (13) Latino (48%), and ten (10) Anglo (37%)—are represented in this study. This participant pool basically mirrored the overall campus student composition (257 students), which was 16.7 % African American, 44.4% Latino, and 38.1% White at the time of the study.

All participants attended a public charter school located in the central Texas area that has as a focus the recovery of young people who have left the traditional public school setting for any number of reasons. The charter school is not attached to a local school district and the population under study represented a mix of students from a variety of former schools who reside in various districts and attendance zones from the surrounding area and beyond. However, the majority of participants reside in a metropolitan area. Given that the participant pool was drawn from a school that consists

of special design elements that have been developed in order to reach students considered at-risk, the school's uniqueness warrants special attention.

Founded originally as a non-profit support service agency for youth the program evolved into a school at the onset of the charter school movement in Texas. In brief, the school has its origins in what was initially a support service initiative for high school dropouts that eventually lead to the opening of a public charter school. Across its nearly 20-year movement towards developing a public charter school the agency continued to provide a multitude of services outside of the educational functions. It is important here to highlight the fact that beyond the operation of the charter school a "comprehensive program of services [is] provided by the organization [that] includes employment training, counseling services, youth corps programs, a fully functioning health center, and individualized learning methods," as described on the agency website (*KKCS*, 2006).

To date the agency targets services to young people between the ages of 16 – 25 years old and the total client base is made up of current charter school enrollees (ages 16 – 21), alumni of the program, and local area college students. Therefore, unlike in a traditional public school structure, students enrolled in the charter school have the additional benefit of gaining full access to all the services of the agency (for free and/or minimal fees depending on the service provided). In providing such access the agency hopes to ensure that all of the young people served, whether the point of entry is through the charter school or some other program target area (e.g., youth corps), are provided the fullest opportunity possible to be successful.

In terms of the school specifically, *KKCS* was founded in the late 1990's. Not completely new as an institution of secondary public education, the school now has a specific track record for serving students commonly considered to be 'at-risk' and 'recovered dropouts' for a decade. The school currently serves approximately 550 students across two separate campuses, both of which are located in one metropolitan area. Some of the more significant elements of the school include: access to a multitude of additional support services—e.g., special health and counseling programs—not generally provided all students in traditional schools; higher concentrations of counselors-to-students; use of a variety of instructional platforms, including traditional classrooms and accelerated learning opportunities via self-paced, computer-based instruction and other concurrent credit accrual opportunities; non-traditional hours of operation; and a unique project-based and service-learning orientation. The uniqueness of the pedagogy is summed up nicely on the school's web site, which highlights the fact that

> Learning at *KKCS* Charter School focuses on the creation of real world products encouraging youth to understand the correlation between education and the application of knowledge. Integrating community service activities into the curriculum encourages youth to strengthen their connections with the community and develop an ethic of service (*KKCS*, 2006).

This aspect of community engagement is of particular essence as a core value of the mission of the school. Directly expressing the importance of connecting students to their communities, the school's literature clearly articulates that "every aspect of the students'

experience in our innovative school is designed to strengthen the students' connections

with the community, develop and ethic of service, and come to know themselves as

capable learners who are part of community solutions" (*KKCS*, 2006). It is from this

context of education that the subject pool was developed and the participants were

selected for the study.

As a practical matter of immediate student accessibility, only students who were

eighteen years of age or older and were therefore capable of signing participant consent

forms on their own behalf, were recruited to participate in the study. In light of the

qualitative and exploratory nature of the study, and due to the fact that all students

attending the school had opted to leave (e.g., dropout) of another school, this sample

population of students was considered to be adequate to meet the goals of the study. Of

those students who were eighteen years of age or older, all were considered eligible for

this study regardless of ethnicity, gender, or socioeconomic status. A total of twenty-

seven (27) participants engaged in the study.

Prior to initiating the study, a series of meetings were held with school representatives,

including the Superintendent, a lead teacher, and a counselor, in order to gain full support and

ensure maximum student participation in the study. In order to recruit participants from the total

eligible group of students (n = 257), letters [see Appendix D] describing the study were drafted and

disseminated to all potential participants with the aid of the school liaisons (the lead teacher and

counselor) who distributed the information in the absence of the researcher during the school day.

Initial contact and distribution of the recruitment letters began nine days prior to conducting the

first set of focus groups, however, recruitment continued through the final day of the focus groups

due to the occasional need to be prepared for and adjust to last minute cancellations, and in order to strive to ensure more robust group sizes. For the sake of ease in communications in the recruitment process, one primary school liaison at the school assisted the researcher in identifying students who were eligible and available to participate in the study in accordance with student schedules and time of day that the focus groups were scheduled. Due to the prominence of students attending in accordance with the school's half-day schedule, some focus groups were scheduled to occur in the morning while others were scheduled to take place during the afternoon session.

Across the recruitment period, potential participants who responded affirmatively received follow up contact by the school liaison prior to the day of the actual focus group in order to confirm the location of the focus group session and to ensure that the student was scheduled during a time that best fit his or her schedule. The school liaison played a vital role in assisting in gathering students who had committed to participating on specific days and at specific times, as well as in steering them to the appropriate location on the day of the scheduled focus group. In instances when last minute cancellations occurred, the liaison solicited some students to participate in the study on the days that the focus group sessions took place in attempt to ensure maximum participation. Each participant signed all necessary consent forms prior to participating in the study.

Table 1 reveals characteristics of the participants as derived from self-responses to the "Intake Questionnaire" [see Appendix E] completed by the participants at the onset of the focus group (see Table 1). The "Intake Questionnaire" requested ten data points of each participant, which are reported in the table by Focus Group Session attended and participant number (e.g., participant #1, participant # 2 and so on…through participant #

27).   The vast majority of the participants (22 participants/81%) had been out of school a year or less prior to entering their current high school program. Meanwhile, only four (4) participants (15%) indicated having been out of school more than one year prior to entering the current program. Of those indicating that they had been out of school for more than a year, one (1) declared absence from school for four or more years (48+ months), two (2) indicated 25 – 36 months away from school, and one (1) indicated being out for between 13 – 24 months. One student neglected to respond to this particular item.

Table 1: Characteristics of Participants

	Group 1					Group 2					Group 3					Group 4					Group 5		Group 6					
Person #	**1**	**2**	**3**	**4**	**5**	**6**	**7**	**8**	**9**	**10**	**11**	**12**	**13**	**14**	**15**	**16**	**17**	**18**	**19**	**20**	**21**	**22**	**23**	**24**	**25**	**26**	**27**	
Question																												**Ave.**
1 Sex	M	M	M	F	F	M	M	M	M	M	F	F	M	F	F	M	M	M	M	F	F	M	F	F	M	M	F	
2 Race	H	H	A	H	H	A	H	W	W	W	H	H	H	W	W	H	H	W	A	W	H	W	H	W	W	A	H	
3 Age	18	19	19	19	18	18	19	19	18	19	18	19	18	18	18	18	19	18	18	18	18	18	18	18	19	18	19	18.37
4 GradType	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	(-)	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	D	
5 GradeLeft	10	12	12	9	11	9	11	9	11	10	10	9	11	10	9	9	10	11	10	11	11	9	10	9	12	(-)	10	10
6 Mo's Out	1-12	1-12	1-12	1-12	1-12	25-36	1-12	1-12	1-12	1-12	1-12	1-12	1-12	1-12	1-12	1-12	1-12	1-12	25-36	1-12	1-12	48+	1-12	0	1-12	1-12	13-24	
7 Multi-DO	N	N	N	Y; 2	Y; 3	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	Y; 3	N	N	N	N	Y; 2	N	N	N	N	N	N	
8 1st Left	10	(-)	11	9	10	9	11	9	11	10	10	9	11	10	9	9	10	11	10	11	11	(-)	10	9	12	(-)	9	10
9 Prior DO	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	N	(-)	N	
10 # Credits	5.5	15	18	8	14	.5	12.5	.5	11.5	7.5	6.5	7	11	5-10	1	0.5	11	18	9	(-)	11	4.5	9.5	5	17	5	0	8.36

Responses revealed by Participant # and Focus Group Participation

KEY:

M – Male   **F** – Female   **H** – Hispanic   **W** – White   **A** – African American   **D** – High School Diploma   **N** – No   **Y** – Yes   **(–)** No data entered

Student indications of grade level enrollment when the decision was made to leave high school are also reflected in Table 1. Their response patterns reveal that one (1) student provided no feedback (4%), eight (8) responded ninth grade (30%), eight (8) responded tenth grade (30%), seven (7) responded eleventh grade (25%), and three (3) identified twelfth grade (11%). The "drop-out" problem was not a chronic charateristic of the participants in general as indicated by the fact that the vast majority, twenty-three (23) respondents (85%), revealed that they had not left school prior to the previously identified point. On the other hand, four (4) students (15%) did indicate having left and returned back to school more than once. Two (2) of these students shared having left school twice, while the other two (2) noted departing three times since entering 9th-grade. Finally, in terms of participant departure during elementary or middle school years, one (1) student (4%) provided no response to this item, while the remainder of the students (96%) indicated no early school departure prior to ninth grade.

100% of the participants who responded to the question regarding whether the goal of returning to school was to earn a diploma or a GED indicated the desire to earn a high school diploma. One (1) respondent did not provide an answer to that particular item. High school completion as the primary goal, these participants reentered high school needing to earn very few credits in some instances and a full compliment of credits in other cases in order to meet high school graduation requirements. During the time of the study the typical credit requirements for graduation spanned anywhere

between 21 – 24 credits. Participants revealed that they had earned from 0 – 18 credits at their previous schools.

Finally, one of the strengths of this particular subject pool is found in the fact that research participants come from myriad former traditional schools. This may be considered a strong point in that any idiosyncratic factors endemic to a particular school or school district from which the students came should not cloud the general tone of the focus groups since the students who provided the data are from various former institutions. Therefore, it is hoped that student perceptions revealed during the focus group conversations reflect similar shared experiences across schools.

Data Collection

Focus groups were employed to meet the goals of the study. In particular this method has been presented to be especially suited for accessing group understandings and meanings (Bloor et al., 2001) and "ideal for exploring people's experiences, opinions, wishes and concerns" (Barbour & Kitzinger, 1999, p.5). Additionally this method provides participants a reassuring and safe context (Bloor et al., 2001; Greenbaum, 2000) within which to interaction and divulge what may be considered sensitive information. To complete this investigation a series of six (6) focus groups with compositions of two (2) – six (6) students per group, which some have classified as "mini-groups" (Edmunds, 1999; Greenbaum, 2000), were completed across a two-week time span in order to obtain all primary sources of data.

Group composition demographics are shown in Table 1. Of the six (6) groups, five (5) of the groups were comprised of five (5) participants within each, while only one session was comprised of a total of two (2) participants. In terms of group homogeneity and heterogeneity, the groups were most similar in that all participants were of close proximity in age (within a year) and each had a commonality in that they all were considered high school dropouts. Some heterogeneous factors were found both within and across groups in terms of group composition. For example, each group was comprised of persons of different ethnic groups (at least two different ethnic groups in each group) and almost every group was comprised of persons of the opposite sex with the exception of one group. Participants were assigned to focus groups based on accessibility as indicated by class schedules and availability during various hours throughout the school day. Therefore, as is often the case in focus group research, the exact composition of each group was a product of chance (Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999). With the assistance of a liaison from the school the best days and times for conducting each of the groups were identified.

Prior to initiating the six focus groups of this research project a pilot group was run in order to test the content of the focus group questions and to ensure question clarity. This aspect of the study was purposefully built in because the voices of research participants were expected to provide a necessary critical perspective on the general quality of the original focus group questions thereby enhancing the face validity of the questions. Based on the flow of the session and comments received by the students who engaged in the pilot group, some refinements were made to the wording of some of the questions posed during the pilot group. A dynamic and unique

aspect of focus group research, participants helped reshape and refocus the structure of the focus group questions early on in the study. Following this process, a schedule for conducting focus group sessions for the research project was agreed upon by the researcher and the school liaison.

Assessment

It was expected that the use of focus groups would reveal the perceptions of 'recovered dropouts' with regard to specific aspects of school that they disliked and specific variables that contributed to their decisions to leave. Likewise, it was expected that students would reveal variables related to their motivations for returning to school. A series of six (6) primary questions were then asked in order to facilitate the discussion and generate the primary data for the study [see Appendix E]. The Data obtained from focus groups were used to measure the aforementioned student perceptions. Of the focus group analysis strategies described by Krueger (1994)—transcript-based analysis, tape-based analysis, note-based analysis, and memory-based analysis—transcript-based analysis is considered the most meticulous procedure. For the purposes of this study the method of transcript-based analysis was used to generate the primary source for data for analysis.

Transcript-based analysis is a fairly common method of analysis as it is presumed to best capture reality. To address challenges in data interpretation transcriptions of audio-taped recordings of each focus group were completed following the completion of all focus group sessions. Use of this transcription approach facilitated the most accurate, comprehensive, and rigorous data analysis process possible (Bloor et al., 2001; Edmunds,

1999; Kitzinger & Barbour, 1999; Krueger, 1994). A portion of the transcription process was completed by the moderator, while a third party assisted in completing the initial transcription process. The method of positioning moderator-as-analyst has been considered essential to the process of obtaining higher quality within data interpretation because of the moderator's direct and immediate involvement with the focus group participants during the time of data collection (Krueger, 1994; Qualitative Research Council of the Advertising Research Foundation, 1985). Therefore, all transcripts were thoroughly reviewed by the moderator/researcher upon receipt from the third party transcriber. During this review transcripts were cross verified with the audiotapes for accuracy and all necessary corrections were made to the transcripts. Thereafter the moderator analyzed the data without assistance.

The process of analysis proceeded with the use of the stepwise system of 'logical analysis,' which as Bloor et al. (2001) explain "searches for premises for stated beliefs and for links between them" (p. 93). Critical to logical analysis is the process of data indexing. While there is no one panacea for indexing, the process generally follows a fundamental structure. Following the general data indexing steps outlined by Frankland and Bloor (1999), the analysis process ensued as follows. First, the moderator/researcher read the transcripts for re-familiarization and to note recurring perceptions, patterns and understandings expressed by the participants. Second, the data were re-read and index code words and labels were assigned to participant commentary that initially captured the general sentiment expressed. These codes were not fixed at this point, but remained malleable throughout the indexing process until final themes and sub-categories were

determined. And third, with additional re-reads that included juxtaposing initial index codes, the final categories emerged and sub-categories were formed [see Appendices F – O]. The categories that were developed are reflective of multiple participant voices and transcend sex and race.

In terms of the 'validity' or 'reliability' of this particular research methodology a few comments are necessary. As previously argued, the context and goals of this study are appropriate for conducting focus group research. When conducted under the appropriate context and analyzed by established procedures, it has been purported that the data generated by the focus groups typically have high face validity (Krueger, 1994). Beyond the possibility of reflecting on the face validity, there is very little discussion of issues regarding the 'validity' of focus groups. On the other hand, what is most clear is that issues of 'reliability' in focus group research have no relevance due to the fact that the context of such research produces results that are bound to the participants of the study, but do not generalize to a population.

Procedures

All focus group sessions were completed at the campus setting in a private and comfortable location during the school's hours of operation. Two researchers facilitated all focus group sessions, which took approximately 60 to 90 minutes each to complete. The principal investigator served as the group moderator, while a second associate served as the assistant moderator. At the time of the initiation each focus group interaction entailed a brief pre-session in order for the moderators to establish rapport, create a

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comfortable environment, and detect variations in participant personality that may affect the focus group sessions (e.g., gregarious versus timid behavior). Based on any such identifiable characteristics, participants were to be strategically and discretely seated in the focus group room. No need to strategically arrange seating patterns was identified during any of the group sessions, therefore seating arrangements were randomly selected by choice of the participants.

Upon entering the room, participants were greeted by the moderator (the principal researcher) and an assistant moderator who aided with setting up the focus group environment and ensuring that data was properly recorded. Participating students sat in a conference-style seating arrangement around a table so that each member of the group, as well as the two facilitators, remained in plain view of one another throughout the session. Participants were also provided the opportunity to enjoy a few refreshments upon entering the room. A short intake questionnaire [see Appendix P] was introduced next and completed by each participant. This tool was used as the primary resource for the collection of general demographic information about the students who participated in the study. After ensuring that each participant had fully completed all appropriate participant consent and approval procedures, the moderator provided a brief explanation and overview of the purpose of the study prior to initiating the focus group [see Appendix Q]. Prior to beginning each session, all participants were briefed on the importance of group confidentiality and the responsibility that the researchers and participants had in keeping all comments made during the session confidential.

To check for tape recording quality and clarity and to allow for participants to acclimate to speaking into the recording device, each member of the group was asked to state their name just prior to initiating the group interaction. The use of audio tape recorders was employed in order to facilitate the data collection and interpretation process. The assistant moderator's primary role was to ensure that all comments were adequately recorded—via recording devices and note taking. In addition, the assistant moderator provided focus group members with a verbal summary of their comments, which had been recorded on large flip pads, during the conclusion of each session in order to ensure proper understanding and to offer participants an opportunity to make any final comments or clarify prior statements. All participants were thanked for their cooperation and reminded of the contact information that had been furnished to them if any questions or concerns related to the research project should arise after leaving the group session.

Ultimately, the focus group process sought to provide a rich data set, replete with participant perceptions and understandings. Form this data an attempt to draw out the 'big picture' and underline general themes is made. Within the results section to follow, previous literature is cross-referenced at different times throughout the analysis. No attempt is made to quantify the data due to the fact that focus group research is strictly a qualitative research methodology and any such analysis would provide a misconstrued interpretation of the data.

CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

In Their Words

> I'm a high school dropout. I'm going back to [school]. I was a failing student. I had D's, I had F's; not even B's or C's man. I got straight A's at this school. I haven't failed a class ever since I've been here. I have been here for a year. Every session has been tight. (Anglo Male, FG5 #22)

The dialogues generated by the focus group research format proved to be extremely telling as a variety of critical themes emerged. As a result of the interactive communicative flow derived from the focus group process student reflections often intertwined, looped and then reconnected, ultimately gelling and emerging across several primary themes. While on occasion micro-themes appeared within and across the dialogues of particular groups, more germane to the intent of the discovery process of this research project are the macro-themes that developed in response to the question set and tended to dominate across groups. It is those macro-themes that provide insight into the areas of schools and the schooling process that predominate the students' perceptions and reveal those elements that were least desirable within the schools that they opted to leave. Likewise, the macro-themes that develop under the questions pertaining to participants reasons for returning to school provide insight into those aspects of their lives and the *KKCS* school structure that support school holding power. The students provide direct feedback regarding circumstances related to/surrounding the central considerations of the study: first, what students dislike; second, why they decide to leave school (a.k.a. drop out); and third, why they decide to return.

The forces and factors that influenced participant decisions are revealed in the text to follow. In order to provide a sense of structure in the presentation of the data, student responses are presented following the order of focus group questioning and are separated by responses to questions dealing with: (1) decisions to leave school; and, (2) decisions to return to school. Furthermore, responses to each question are grouped under the thematic categories that emerged during the focus group discussions. For example, within each set of responses per question related to the participants' reasons for leaving school, comments are grouped under one of five macro-themes. This is due to the fact that both within and across focus group sessions the responses elicited by the questions regarding reasons for leaving school revealed five major themes. Specifically, the themes that emerged are categorized as (a) "care," (b) "relationships," (c) "school and class size," (d) "school policies," and (e) "professionalism."

In brief, students tended to report perceptions that former school faculty and staff members exuded a general lack of care for their welfare. Students also described school environments that were typified by non-existent and/or non-enduring relationships with faculty and staff members. In terms of class size and school size, the participants frequently complained about perceived effects of having high concentrations of students in the schools they left. Reflections included descriptions of frustrations with cluttered halls and classrooms to difficulties in getting help due to large class sizes. The students also revealed that they possessed a particular expectation for a certain level of professionalism to be exuded by teachers and administrators—for example, instructional competence, caring attitude, and support for all learners regardless of student competency

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levels. The majority of such comments conveyed the perception that the teachers and

staff generally fell short of meeting those expectations. Finally, reflections regarding the

impacts of certain types of school policies (e.g., Dress Codes, In-School Suspension, and

Tardy and Attendance Policies) commonly arose during the conversations. Often

students regarded many of these policies as ineffective, while pointing out ironies of

negative impacts of policies often implicitly designed to encourage students.

Questions related to reasons for return did not reveal the same five overarching

thematic categories as solicited by the questions related to reasons for leaving. In fact,

while there were instances when the categories revealed by participants overlapped

across the three questions pertaining to student decisions to return to school, additional

themes were at times generated within but not across the responses to questions asked.

For example, when students responded to the first question that asked them to describe

the main influences for their return to school, remarks centered around five key

influences: (1) family; (2) future opportunities; (3) personal goals; (4) peers; and (5)

boredom.   However, responses to the second question that asked participants to describe

particular aspects about *KKCS* that made the decision to return easier centered on three

additional prominent themes: (1) school environment; (2) school structure; and (3) the

AmeriCorps program. Meanwhile, the third and final question that asked participants to

reveal factors that played an important part in keeping them enrolled since entering

KKCS elicited responses that mirrored themes developed under the first two questions,

namely (1) family; (2) personal goals; and (3) school environment. Family influence and

the influence of personal goals reflected themes developed in response to question one,

while the third variable that arose from the dialogues, school environment, mirrored this category as it evolved in question two.

In the data that follows participant voices are presented at times in order to provide insight into some of the typical kinds of responses presented under particular themes. To reiterate, the following analysis proceeds in a step-wise fashion that directly correlates to the order of the focus group questions. As a caveat, it is important to acknowledge that while the voices of the students are presented as stated—with a small degree of editing for readability—the themes that have been developed represent a merger of reflections, assertions, and perceptions that were pulled from all responses provided during the separate focus group sessions and tied together.

Question 1: "What are all of the things that you disliked about your last school

that contributed to your decision to leave?"

Category 1: Care

In response to this question students shared a variety of perspectives on elements

of schooling that they disliked that contributed to their decision to leave. One prominent

variable readily identified by students centered on the theme of "care." Specifically,

students frequently portrayed the sense that "care" was lacking in schools. A vast

majority of students involved in the focus groups clearly revealed perceptions that the

teachers and staff members in the schools that they opted to leave were not very

supportive of them. The students expressed sentiments of feeling a lack of staff

commitment towards their general welfare and a lack of compassion for their particular

needs as learners. This was especially true in instances when students saw themselves as

not fitting the norm, and generally, they categorized themselves as a part of the out-group

with respect to "the norm." This perception was revealed on numerous occasions

throughout the group dialogues and was captured by descriptions of events and activities

that left indelible impressions on the students.

The attitudes presented and the actions (and/or lack of actions) taken by school

staff members played a significant role in the formation of this perception. On some

occasions participants would directly reveal discontent regarding this matter by simply

stating in a very matter-of-fact manner that "they don't care," while at other times the statements made by the students would imply this position. Impressions that teachers did not promote caring learning environments and/or that students simply did not feel cared about were noted in a variety of assertions.

Some participants commented that they experienced a lack of compassion towards non-mainstream issues that they were enduring outside of school, like having to be employed and work late hours at night. Participants also mentioned that in instances when they had personal problems teachers would not engage in conversations with them about such things. In one instance a student responded using the following condemning characterization, "They don't call you… If your grandmother's dead and you're depressed and the state of mental breakdown, they don't care." (Hispanic Female, FG3 #11)

Mention was also made that a lack of care was promoted in the school when teachers allowed students to either under perform or not perform at all in the classroom. For example, students stated that they experienced this lack of "care" when teachers would allow them to sleep in class and/or do whatever they wanted to do during class. Two participants captured this sentiment clearly with one stating, "I mean I sat like right up front right next to teachers, passed out, I mean just passed out every day for two hours…Like she didn't care, which I knew she didn't." (Hispanic Male, FG3 #13) The other participant revealed frustration in this matter proposing that "As long as they are getting paychecks…you could sit in the back the whole time and stare into space and they wouldn't even talk with you…there's no point in being there" (White Female, FG3 #14).

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Several students clearly perceived that teachers were falling short of fulfilling obligations to students by not holding them accountable as this issue was raised multiple times as a dislike about school. As stated in the words of another student, "I mean it's the same thing they've been saying, you know, you go to class, the teachers don't really care, you pretty much do whatever you want" (Hispanic Female, FG3 #12). As seen in the statements of these participants, not only did they believe that the teachers did not care, they also reveal the direct negative effect that the teachers' nonchalance had on their own level of caring about school and desire to participant in the schooling process.

Other participants expressed feeling that there was less willingness or reluctance on the teacher's part to support their needs in the classroom. Some participants perceived that teachers purposefully ignored them and/or purposefully did not provide needed support to them. One participant revealed his perspective stating, "Whenever I would go, I wouldn't get any help from my teachers with any assignments, and like, they'd act like I wasn't even there, so why be there in the first place?"(Anglo Male, FG2 #8). Along these lines, students also commented on the role that particular instructional delivery methods played, suggesting that the use of less interactive teaching styles and more "sit-and-get" work also signaled a lack of genuine care for them as learners. A lack of direct interaction with students during classroom instruction was also perceived as a function of lack care is described by one young man, who states

> Teachers didn't care at all. They just get up there and they would say, 'okay, here's your work, here you go,' no help, no nothing." "Yeah, I agree, cause the school I attended, the teachers didn't give a damn. (Male, FG4)

Beyond this a lack of personal contact with students—via phone or otherwise—in instances when the students perceived themselves to be faltering at school, or in general, was perceived as another expression of a lack of care. Of additional note was the fact that students drew comparisons between their prior schooling experiences and experiences at *KKCS* in order to reinforce notions of care and caring environments.

In general, experiences with care at their former schools paled in comparison to perceptions of care experienced at *KKCS*. As the students dialoged it became clear that the participants definitely discerned a difference between the levels of care expressed by staff at *KKCS* versus that which they encountered in former home school environments. This realization is summed in the words of a participant who states, "Still it's the fact that in a regular school, they don't care…they're like, okay, we are not you first priority, that's okay. But a place like [*KKCS*], they actually do, and they're like, okay, we are your first priority" (Male, FG4).

Category 2: Relationships

Another core issue raised as a part of responses to school dislikes that factored into students' decisions to leave revolved around the nature of personal relationships in high school environments. Participants generally shared negative reflections about the relationships encountered in their former schools. While discussing former school experiences, participants tended to portray the nature of relationships as weak and even divisive in some instances. The statement of a participant who characterizes the situation

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in the following manner intimates the perception that relationships between students and staff were at odds.

> "There's like this huge barrier between the students and the teachers over at those schools, the school is was in. The teachers, man, they look at you…you're not on the same level, you know." (Anglo Male, FG5)

Another who provides additional commentary regarding the state of teacher relationships with students echoes the same sentiment noting that "Unless you try to get close to the teachers, they're not going to like, they're not going to care about you at all. Very few teachers ever actually talk to me at all." (Anglo Male, FG4 #18) Interestingly enough, however, most of the students simultaneously voiced a high regard for the relationships that were in place at *KKCS*.

Many comments related to school relationships were presented by students in the form of a comparison between the *KKCS* school environment and former school settings. Students clearly identified positively with the teacher approaches at *KKCS*, which were frequently characterized as including proactive involvement, meaningful personal interactions, and development of personal relationships with students. In fact, perspectives shared regarding fundamental relationship differences found between settings went so far as to specifically describe teachers at *KKCS* as friends. In addition to identifying the friendly and welcoming nature of the environment, which simultaneously included a focus on the academic success, participants often referenced how they felt supported by the teachers at *KKCS*. Students also shared perceptions that tied relationships to the nature of care at schools.

Category 3: School/Class Size

In terms of issues related to School/Class size, students reiterated the negative effects that they perceived to be outcomes of having previously attended big high schools prior to entering *KKCS*. Many accounts of large volumes of students being found in schools and classroom environments were shared. One issue noted was the awkward experience of transitioning from a smaller middle school into a vastly larger high school environment. The overwhelming sensation of 'feeling lost' was directly revealed by students as they relayed stories of struggling to get to lockers and frustrations that they faced during passing periods due to the high volume of students traveling between classes. Some even discussed difficulties in arriving at their next class on time due to the crammed hallways and resulting consequences of tardy arrivals.

Beyond discussing congestion-related issues and revealing discontent with the general size of high schools, participants identified another significant issue. Students articulated that one major pitfall of attending a larger schooling environment was the fact that the classes were too big. Students further identified that both student and teacher frustrations arise from functioning in such a setting. Beyond this, participants shared the perception that support for more needy students was less manageable in a large class environment.

Frequently the participants spoke about the differences they found in the direct support systems afforded to them in the smaller *KKCS* school setting as opposed to that which they received prior to entry into that environment. Again the students emphasized

the benefits of a smaller school size and small classroom interactions during their discourse. When called upon, the juxtaposition of former environments to the *KKCS* environment generally supported the position that smaller schools are healthier environments.

Category 4: School Policies (Dress Code, In-School Suspension and Tardiness)

Another topic discussed by students as a dislike about school dealt with issues regarding school policies that the participants found disagreeable. Many perceived school dress codes as overzealous although they acknowledged one understanding of the source of the rules—gang-related issues. Interestingly, while students recognized that the dress code rules were put in place in large part to promote safer learning environments, for example by reducing promotion of gang-related colors, they also believed that focus on gang-related issues no longer deserved such levels of attention. Some students even implied that wearing gang-related colors was a fad of the past and no longer a prominent issue among kids in schools. In short, the participants promoted a view of disfavor with school dress code policies and revealed the belief that school officials made a bigger deal out of school dress than necessary. Students also noted the desire to be able to have more freedom with dress across all focus groups. Furthermore, the students tended to see dress code policies as infringements on their personal freedoms of expression and/or identity.

Outside of dress code, the students readily voiced concerns with two other traditional policy-oriented aspects of school environments. Use of systems such as In-School Suspension (ISS) and what the students referred to as "tardy tables" to deal with

tardy arrivals to class tended to generate negative responses from the participants. In terms of the tardy system students identified an irony in the practice of implementing a system that required them to miss more class time when they arrived tardy, by having them report to a tardy table in order to gain access to their classrooms. For the most part this practice was seen as a problem given the mass numbers of students that ended up having to report to the tardy table area, which in turn caused long delays in returning to class. The participants expressed a strong desire to have had more progressive ways of dealing with tardiness as opposed to using a system that caused students to miss greater amounts of class time.

In terms of suspension-related policies, students again perceived irony in traditional systems that generally lead to students missing more class time and eventually missing school days as a punishment for late arrivals and missed class days. Students even noted that there seemed to be a spiral effect that began with being tardy, which lead to in-school suspension, and ended with either suspension or even expulsion from school. As for ISS, students shared two fundamental perceptions. First, ISS was seen as an ineffective practice and waste of time for all because no learning occurred during this time. Second, participants believed that school staff focused more on putting students in ISS than on teaching them. The same held true of participant perceptions regarding out-of-school suspensions. Participants perceived out-of-school suspension as "too harsh of a punishment" (Anglo Male, FG2 #8) for missing class and viewed it as an ineffective form of punishment, because the consequence caused students to miss more class and school time.

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Category 5: Professionalism

Professionalism Throughout the discussions students revealed that they held high expectations for teachers when it came to the ways these participants believed teachers should conduct themselves as professional educators and in their daily interactions with students. Students upheld a particular position that the teachers should ultimately model behaviors and mannerisms expected of the students. The focus group members reported that faculty/staff in the traditional school systems that they left: (1) abused power of authority on occasion; (2) exuded poor attitudes, lacked sensitivity, and/or were emotional in the classrooms; (3) implemented poor teaching and learning practices; and (4) stereotyped students.

An additional area of concern that emerged from the participant conversations under this theme related to student perceptions of coaches who also served in the capacity as teachers. Issues primarily centered on student perceptions that persons who served as coaches typically lacked the teaching expertise exemplified by non-coaching faculty members. Beyond the tendency of portraying these teachers as under-qualified next to their non-coaching counterparts, student reflections exude a sense that these staff members were placed in those teaching positions at the students' expense due to athletic programming needs. Again while speaking about the coach-teachers, students provided feedback that pointed to their ultimate desire to learn and for teachers to be able to meet their learning needs. The criticisms elevated during these dialogues centered on coach-

teachers lack of teaching expertise and fairness issues that stemmed from perceived

coach-teacher favoritism towards student athletes.

Question 2: "Keeping in mind all the things you have stated that you disliked which would you say had the most influence on your decision to leave"

Category 1: Care

After sharing multiple dislikes that contributed to their decisions to leave, participants were asked to identify which of those elements had *most* influence on their ultimate decision to leave their former schools. In response, some students discussed how a lack of support provided by teachers ultimately led to their decisions. One young lady described a situation that precipitated her decision to begin skipping classes and then finally exiting the system. While initially this participant cites personal work-related reasons for her departure from school, she ultimately expressed how frustrating interactions with one teacher had a very negative impact on her desire to attend school. Towards the end of her retrospect the student drew the conclusion that personal issues were not the sole reason for her final departure, acknowledging that a lack of teacher support strongly influenced her final decision.

Likewise, another student derives a similar conclusion after initially accepting full responsibility for his departure from school. This student begins with the reflection that "there was nothing that the school could do" (African American Male, FG2 #6) in order to have supported him as he dealt with issues that finally lead to his decision to leave. However, during the course of his reflections, he too reached the conclusion that perhaps there was something more that could have been done by school staff that may have really made a difference.

There were additional times when students initially accepted full blame or placed blame for their early school departure on non-school related issues. Interestingly, however, as they further reflected, dialoged, and played back scenarios, participants ultimately identified some school-related influences. In one case a student began by identifying decisions to hang out with peers instead of attending classes to be the primary reason for her departure. However, while talking about what drove her to opt to hang out with friends versus going to classes, her reflections ultimately led to a less self-directed conclusion. In the end, she expressed that she was essentially unmotivated to attend classes due to feeling that teachers lacked faith in students like her.

Other students echoed the sentiment of feeling a lack of support from the teachers, which in turn seemed to provide a gateway for the students to slack off and give up. This especially rang true when students felt that they had fallen too far behind in classes to be able to successfully complete the required coursework. Being behind in work coupled with the perception that teachers did not care about student welfare was revealed as a bad combination. In fact it was the general tendency of the participants to convey the belief that there was no chance of gaining support under such circumstances.

Finally, many of the participants voiced a total loss of faith in finding any support within the school systems that they opted to leave. Some expressed feeling that no advocacy occurred on their behalf, while others recounted feeling overtly pushed out of the system. Again, the participants perceived a lack of care for their wellbeing as "students" in their former school communities and even called the general atmosphere of schools into question.

Category 2: Relationships

The need for establishment of relationships that reveal a sense of care for the students did surface indirectly when students identified what they most disliked, however none of the participant responses specifically identified relationship issues as the dislike that most contributed to their decision to leave.   In other words, students did not directly state that school-based relationships most influenced their decisions to leave. On the other hand relationship issues were generally revealed under a larger context of issues, or dislikes, that lead to the decision to leave.

For example, one participant spoke of multiple dislikes that culminated in the decision to leave, but during a final analysis points to the significance of a relationship-oriented issue (qualified in this case as "support") stating, "I just had no support, man. Nobody was like, hey, you know, you can do this" (Anglo Male, FG5 #22). Likewise, in another example a participant noted the importance of sincere connections and relationships with staff in terms of helping students stay in school. While reflecting on the possibilities of what might had sustained him, this participant disclosed the perception that if he had a person to trust and confide in at the school during his hardships it may have had a different impact on his decision to leave.

Finally, some of the students perceived an additional element of relationships as critical to their decision to leave. In this case students voiced the concern that teacher's lacked respect for them, which played a major role in their decisions. In fact, one of the participants attributed all of the 'dislikes' mentioned during the focus group to one core

issue, namely respect. Other members of that particular group agreed with this

summation.

Category 3: School/Class Size

Across the groups, only one participant lifted the issue of class size as the major

contributing factor to her decision to leave. In response to the request for participants to

share which of the previously stated variables had the most influence on their decision to

leave, she states "I would go with early school and class too big and too few teachers."

(Anglo Female, FG6 #24)

Category 4: School Policies

While many participants initially voiced concerns about school policies regarding

dress code, ISS, tardiness, and suspensions in response to the initial focus group question

no participants lifted any of these policies as their primary catalyst for deciding to leave.

However, the issue of the length of the school day emerged for a small number of the

participants. Likewise, in terms of the structure of the day, a couple of students also

voiced that traditional school hours and schedules (e.g., block scheduling) played a major

role in influencing them to leave.

Category 5: Professionalism

Participants looked upon the faculty and staff of their former schools with a very

critical eye when sorting out their decisions to leave. Regardless of academic ability or

personal circumstances, the students clearly expected teachers to provide them with quality educational experiences and treatment. Indicating high levels of expectations for staff to be professionally competent, participants indeed pointed toward teacher incompetence as an ultimate determining factor for departure. Some students indicated that they looked towards the adults in schools to create favorable conditions for learning. Likewise, participants expected suitable learning opportunities to be afforded to every student, not just those who fit the norm. On occasion participants made direct references to viewing teachers as role models and the disappointment that they experienced when teachers fell short of fulfilling this role.

A few of the students also stated that they believed that they were going to be kicked out (a.k.a. "push outs") of school prior to the time that they ultimately decided to leave on their own. Along these lines, for example, one participant admitted that he had not proactively left his school; rather he had been kicked out of school. During his retrospect, his reflections mirrored those of other students who had experienced negative interactions with teachers who also happened to be coaches. In short, it turned out that this student began skipping a class that was taught by a coach he disliked, which he ultimately lead to his removal from the school.

Finally, some participants expressed concern about stereotypes that seemed to preclude their chances for encountering equal opportunities for learning or gaining support in schools. For example, students expressed feeling that the teachers and administrators at times wrongly and negatively stereotyped them. In response to the question regarding what most influenced students' decisions to leave one participant

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stated, "For me it kind of is all of them, but I think the stereotype that they gave me and

them worrying about me getting in trouble more than learning was probably the main

reason I left" (Anglo Female, FG3 #15).

The stereotyping phenomenon was often attributed to things like past activities,

peer group cliques, and/or their outward appearance (e.g., body piercing, tattoos, and

clothing). A few focus group participants also identified stereotyping as a student-related

issue, but the vast majority of focus in this area centered on faculty and staff. One

intriguing aspect of this discussion was the fact that the students perceived the *KKCS*

environment differently from traditional schools in terms of the more supportive position

of staff and students towards one another regardless of outward physical appearances.

Participants often stated that it was more like a family at *KKCS*, while additionally noting

that traditional peer-group structures found in their former high schools where non-

existent at *KKCS*.

Question 3: "Based on your experiences, what recommendations would you make

to the staff at those schools you decided to leave so that they can make

corrections in order to keep students in school?"

Category 1: Care

Students revealed perspectives on how they thought schools might be changed

into more caring and sustaining environments. In some cases the students provided direct

feedback that spoke to the importance of "care" in schools. On other occasions students

provided feedback via comparisons between their former and current environments, as

well as additional information that lifted this variable indirectly.

In terms of the more direct feedback students said things like "just care"

(Hispanic Female, FG3 #11) and "don't teach unless you want to" (Anglo Female, FG3

#15) during the focus group dialogues. While responding to this question students also

implied ways that school staff show that they care, including engaging in more personal

communications and interactions with students. In general students revealed the

perception that care is developed via building relationships, showing respect for students,

and engaging in interpersonal communication, as the recommendations that they made

centered on these characteristics.

Participants also provided recommendations via responses that juxtaposed the

KKCS schooling environment and their former schooling environments. While doing so

students consistently uplifted positive characteristics of *KKCS*, highlighting how school

staff revealed care. Embodying this phenomenon one participant states

The first thing that I would tell them is for all of them to come sit in a classroom

here for one day and watch how the teachers here do their work. That's the first

thing I would tell them. I would say, "Come watch a class, and watch how they

teach in our school. And this is what you should do."…. [T]hey listen, they sit

down and say, "What can I do to help you learn this?" and they hear both sides of

the story, like we were saying earlier. They respect us. (Anglo Female, FG4 #20)

During a separate focus group session another student notes perceived differences

between *KKCS* and former school staff, garnering agreement form the group. With

regard to the staff at *KKCS* he maintains that "They're not all uptight with a stick up their

but and stuff, you know. These people actually care." (Anglo Male, FG4 #18). One

main point made by the students was that teachers should "love the job" (Hispanic

Female, FG5 #21). As pointed out by a comment made in reaction this statement a

participant shares how teaching for the love of it reflects care, proclaiming

These teachers here, man, they're here to teach. Cause they care, but I mean. I

don't know. The public schools, the way that public school teachers think is just

different from what it is over here. It's just they're too uptight man…Over here at

my school, my teacher, he's a teacher man. He actually teaches me and he cares

and stuff. (Anglo Male, FG5 #22)

Category 2: Relationships

As students pondered the kinds of things that could have been done differently at

the institutions they decided to leave, the need for the establishment of secure

relationships between students and adults at the schools regularly emerged. The

importance of teachers and students having sincere connections and genuine relationships

was a very common theme. In particular, the participants focused on an element of

relationship building expected of teachers towards students. Comparisons made between

the *KKCS* environment and former school environments further drove home the

importance of personal relationships to these students. Also, participant comments

identified the importance of the students feeling respected by the teachers and staff as a

pertinent factor in relationship building.

      During participant dialogues a variety of recommendations related to ways that

relationships might be strengthened evolved throughout the focus groups.   Suggestions

to teachers include lightening up and becoming more involved with students, establishing

relationships with students that are more like friendships, and creating a comfortable

environment for all students. In addition to making direct suggestions, participants

provided additional feedback by referencing some examples of what they perceived as

positive relationships in the *KKCS* school environment. Reference point examples

included interactions such as being on a first name basis with teachers; having a principal

that knows student names and speaks, but not just due to being in trouble; and proactively

involving students and parents in school life (i.e., policy, organizations, decision making)

to name a few.

      Another relationship-based nuance of the *KKCS* school environment that emerged

during the focus groups was the perception of the school as a "family." Students

described *KKCS* as a "family" and "a second home" in terms of the ways that students

and staff interacted and the levels of support that the school provided the students. This dynamic was noted to be unique to *KKCS* and was revealed during comments lifting the importance personal relationships. The students noted that at *KKCS* a continual proactive focus of attention on both the personal welfare and the academic success of the student remained. According to the participants, staff constantly ask them if things were going okay or if they needed additional help, and there seemed to be a genuinely positive regard reflected towards students throughout the day whether in classrooms, hallways, or elsewhere.

Category 3: School/Class Size

Participants provided a number of suggestions related to changes in school and class size in order to enhance high schools. Noting that schools tend to be overcrowded recommendations to reduce the numbers of students in schools ranged from building more schools, to making schools bigger (i.e., physically, not in student number) and classes smaller. Additional recommendations provided were to "cut all of the schools into fourths… [because] they're too big" (Anglo Female, FG3 #15) and to "get more teachers" (Hispanic Female, FG5 #21) to remedy the problem.

Two key feedback points that resonated across the groups was the perception that both school size and class size play a role in school effectiveness. As one student pointed out, the smaller the school the better, because "[w]hen everybody knows everybody it goes a lot smoother" (Anglo Male, FG2 #8). In terms of class size, participants tended to agree that smaller class sizes would be most beneficial in order to allow for better teacher

support for students. An additional perceived benefit of small class size mentioned by a participant is the reduction of frustration for teachers and students.

Category 4: School Policies

Participants had relatively little to say about school policies. Limited responses specifically revolved around this theme. One participant, for example, mentions while discussing school size that "even if you change the size it will still have the same policies" (Anglo Male, FG5 #22), but this student offered no suggestions with regard to school policies. On the other hand, a participant in a separate focus group did reiterate the perception that rules are an overwhelming agent of schools. Emphasizing the toll that rules can take on students this participant makes the following point, "It's just too many to go by. When you have so many rules you know, you're always in trouble" (African American Male, FG4 #19). During this appeal, the participant clearly states concerns regarding what he perceives to be an overabundance of rules. Similarly another student focused on suspension policies found in schools, making the recommendation that staff find alternate ways of dealing with disciplining students for events like skipping school as opposed to using traditional suspension and in-school suspension strategies.

Finally, mention was made regarding on the job training (OJT) policies at school. One participant noted that the option for all students to access OJT opportunities would improve schools. In this participant's view such options are only made available to students with special needs; therefore, he noted that a policy change enabling greater access to OJT would be beneficial.

Category 5: Professionalism

This topic area did not generate much conversation among focus group participants in terms of recommendations. One issue raised in more than one of the groups, however, was the need for changes to be made in how subject matter is taught. Regarding instructional practices, some participants shared the opinion that more teaching strategies should be implemented in schools. In response to this perception students noted that school staff should change instruction by implementing "integrated classes" (Anglo Male, FG2 #9), making learning more relevant and interesting to students, "teaching in a way that everyone can learn" (Hispanic Female, FG3 #12), and being "fair to everybody" (Hispanic Female, FG6 #27). Beyond these pedagogical and curricular recommendations, mention was also made that schools should "Get real teachers…teachers who know what they are doing, rather than filling in spots" (African American Male, FG6 #26). Beyond these suggestions little attention was given to issues related to professionalism and expertise otherwise.

<u>*Decision to Return Focus Group Questions and Responses*</u>

Question 1: "What are the main influences that have led you to decide to return to school?"

When students described reasons that lead them to return to school their comments centered around five key influences: (1) family; (2) personal goals; (3) increased future opportunities (e.g., work); (4) peers; and (5) boredom. These common themes emerged both across and within group dialogues and each of these influences are examined further in the text to follow. Of additional note, students revealed a perception throughout the focus groups that a high school diploma carried greater long-term value over a GED.

Category 1: Family

Family influences ranged from parental persuasion and influence, to the desire to set good examples for siblings, to the desire to provide for a child, and/or response to the death of a parent. When describing parental influences, participants mentioned demands that some parents made of them to finish school and even cases where parents admonished them to complete high school while threatening them with the possibility of loss of a future inheritance. On the other hand some participants expressed a lack of direct admonishment by parents and rather an internal drive to do as well as or accomplish more than their parent(s) previously did. The final way that students revealed parents played a major role in influencing decisions to return to school was found in the

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commentary of a couple of participants who explained that upon encountering the death of a parent, they were compelled to complete high school in accordance with parent wishes.

Another source of influence originating from the family dynamic proved to be the siblings of participants. Several students mentioned that during their hiatus from formal education the realization that they were role models to their little brothers and sisters occurred. In particular, those participants who mentioned siblings as a source of influence, stated with conviction a desire "to set an example for" younger siblings. Likewise, a couple of students who were parents provided similar commentary expressing a desire to be able to provide the best possible life for their kids. Having children to provide for turned out to be the final family influence described by the participants. Student-parents clearly acknowledged the perception that by finishing high school they could reach other personal goals that they had set for themselves, which would in turn enable them to provide for their kids.

Category 2: Personal Goals

Personal goals were also a primary source of influence for several of the participants. As might be expected the goals revealed during the focus groups ranged from student to the next, nonetheless students clearly stated connections between their personal goals and the importance of earning a high school diploma. Resulting comments included expressions of desires to reach personal goals such as one participant's drive to become the first in the immediate family to graduate from high

school. Meanwhile, others expressed more fundamental goals based on the desires to simply succeed and/or to meet a personal goal that they had set to graduate. Still other participants mentioned goals linked to post-secondary educational endeavors. These aspirations included the desire to attend post-secondary institutions as well as career-oriented ambitions that required completion of high school at minimum and continuation in an educational program beyond high school for some.

Category 3: Future Opportunities

Closely related to some of the participants' personal goals, the potential for enhancement of *future opportunities* emerged from the dialogues as another primary influence. At various times during the focus groups participants directly acknowledged understanding the connection between completion of high school and future job and earning potential. Occasionally participants provided direct comments about the inability of a person to gain access to meaningful work without a high school diploma. Comments like "you've got to get your diploma so you can get a better paying job…without a diploma you can't go nowhere" (Hispanic Male, FG2 #7) represents the articulation of this particular perception. Students also noted the self-enhancing nature of completing high school in terms of future opportunities in general as well as the relationship of this accomplishment to earning potential. Identification of high school completion as a marker of success within American society occurred as well during the student conversations regarding potential opportunities that arise after receiving a high school diploma.

Category 4: Peers

While revealing the primary reasons for returning to school, the *influence of peers* surfaced. Feedback in this regard was very positive as the students shared stories about how friends, acquaintances, and even a boyfriend encouraged school re-enrolment. In addition to positive peer pressure coming in the form of friends urging the participants to finish school, another indirect form of positive peer influence emerged within reflections that participants shared regarding their classmates and peers who graduated on time. Seeing friends and peers graduate on time, therefore leaving the participants behind, definitely played a role in inspiring some focus group members to complete high school.

Another point of consideration provided by the students was the explicit role that some of their peers played in getting them not only to return to school, but to specifically enroll at *KKCS*. Participants revealed that communications with peers who were either attending or had formerly attended *KKCS* were both very passionate and positive regarding the program. Additionally, the students noted that after learning about the structure and nature of the *KKCS* school program, they believed that it provided the only school environment that they desired to reenter.

Category 5: Boredom

Lastly, the stated influence of *boredom* was generated through connections that students made when realizing the amount of time they were wasting doing nothing, while simultaneously gaining a professed better sense of purpose and/or direction. Several

participants shared that not attending school reached a point of diminishing returns for them, as frequently they had no other directed activity or work otherwise in place. In fact the participants voiced agreement that a trend toward boredom generally sets in for students who exit school early. By many accounts being out of school was initially seen as "great," but having that level of freedom without direction later became personally unfulfilling and even a questionable life style in their own opinions. Students revealed these perceptions via comments like "I just got tired of sitting at home everyday and watching TV….it was great for the first month (Anglo Female, FG3 #14). Similarly others reflected on how it eventually felt to be out of school with no aim, noting that the lack of purpose in their lives was the driving point for their returning to school. Participants who revealed boredom as a primary influence commonly reported lack of personal satisfaction with "sitting around doing nothing" (African American Male, FG6 #26).

Question 2: "Are there particular things about your current high school that are different from the high school you left that made your decision to return to school any easier?"

Three prominent themes developed in response to this inquiry. First, reflections commonly lifted aspects of the overall *school environment*. Second, the *school structure* was noted as a critical aspect of the program. And third, a number of participants described the seminal role that a particular feature of the school, the *AmeriCorps Program*, played in making the decision to return easier. A variety of aspects about the *KKCS* experience were pointed out as different from prior high school experiences under each of the three aforementioned topics. Each of the elements described by the students were deemed to ease school reentry and provided a critical difference for the participants, especially in comparison to former school environments. Students were not shy about relaying their pleasure with the *KKCS* learning environment and/or their perception of the superiority of the school's staff and practices as compared to the schools that they left.

Category 1: School Environment

Perhaps best captured by the term overall *school environment*, participants described many areas of the *KKCS* program that stood out, making the school unique from others and an extremely favorable environment. One identified feature surfaced through explications of the role that "everybody" at the school played in creating a positive environment. When describing what it was about 'everybody' that was different

and made the return to school easier, comments provided included descriptions of the people at *KKCS* as welcoming, nice, laid back, and "like a second family" (Hispanic Female, FG3 #11). Students especially keyed in on differences found in the teachers and counselors at this school when describing the overall environment. Participants directed kudos towards the *KKCS* teachers while qualifying them as caring, respectful, supportive, helpful, and willing to work with students time and time again. In addition to the role the teachers played in creating a positive environment, a similar reference was made to the positive role the school counselors played by consistently "checking up on you [and] just being their" (Female, FG6). A few students also inferred that this favorable environment was in part generated by the fact that students called staff by their first names.

Participants also mentioned a number of specific programmatic elements that bolstered the overall environment. Most references of this nature pertained to the school's small size, smaller class sizes, and the school's orientation program. Frequently in response to the question regarding things that are different about *KKCS* that made returning easier, students would say things like school size or class size without any further elaboration. On each occasion, however, student responses affirmed the school's smallness as a positive aspect of the environment. This variable allowed for the provision of "more individual attention from the teacher" (Hispanic Female, FG1 #5) by description of one focus group member.

The orientation program was another factor mentioned a couple of times. Evidence that this program component played a helpful roll came from participants who recalled ways that the orientation influenced them. One participant directly stated that

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"the orientation got me here" (Hispanic Male, FG1), while a participant of another focus group reflected on a significant impression left upon her by a student's testimony given during the orientation about the purpose of the school and the positive relationships that exist in the school. Similarly other students shared that key foundational interactions such as experiencing the very welcoming nature of everybody towards them as new students at the school, and experiencing a non-traditional integrated course—entitled "Journey"—as a first class coupled with a great teacher played heavily in easing their return.

Category 2: School Structure

Of a separate categorical nature *school structure* was another overarching element emphasized during the focus groups. In terms of "structure" particular references were made regarding the daily schedule and class structure. Students revealed these to be very appealing structures in place at *KKCS* that allowed for a greater ease in returning to school. Many times over, for example, participants mentioned that having the option of attending school for four hours a day, during either the morning or afternoon four-hour session, proved to be an invaluable source of influence and comfort. In some cases having the ability to attend school for only four hours created an essential opportunity for those who needed to work in addition to attending school. Outside of providing less stress for working students, some participants voiced pleasure with the fact that the entire day would not have to be consumed with attending school, which in and of itself made it

easier to return. On the other hand, for those who desired to attend school for a full eight

hours a day, they had the ability to do just that and potentially finish school sooner.

Another positive aspect mentioned related to the structure of the school had to do

with the way that classes are structured. Due to the fact that the *KKCS* model includes

both accelerated and integrated learning opportunities students were encouraged to

attend. Participants remarked on how important it was to be able to more rapidly

complete coursework, especially in cases where students were far behind in completion

of high school credits. The prospect of graduating sooner was definitely detailed as a

benefit of the program structure by several participants who noted that to be a core

difference and reason for specifically returning to *KKCS* for high school. Furthermore,

having some classes shortened from yearlong experiences to nine and eighteen week

sessions was also perceived as an added benefit of the program.

Category 3: AmeriCorps Program

Finally, multiple references to the presence of the *AmeriCorps Program* at *KKCS*

were mentioned throughout the conversations. The students clearly identified the

AmeriCorps opportunity as an asset noting the unique benefits of involvement in this

service program. Regularly highlighted during each focus group, chief benefits of the

program included the opportunity to: (1) attend school for four hours a day; (2) receive

pay for attending school and working; and (3) receive scholarship money towards post-

secondary education. Distinctly connected to easing the return to school, the program also

proved important to students because it provides the ability "to get paid to go to school,

but yet…get a scholarship to get somewhere further in life like college or [*Anywhere*

Community College]" (Hispanic Male, FG4 #16). Students clamored over the fact that

they would receive pay for involvement in the program. Many participants expressed

either having been involved in the program at some point earlier upon entering the school

or current involvement in the program. One additional aspect of the AmeriCorps

Program that was appealing to the students was the fact that they could elect to be

involved for either six months or one year. Students viewed this programmatic

opportunity with very high regard.

Question 3: "If you have thought about dropping out since entering this program, what factors play an important role in keeping you here in this school program?"

The final question posed to the students elicited responses that somewhat mirrored the responses given to the first question asked related to the reasons for returning to school. In fact the participants reported three primary factors and of these, two directly mirrored previously stated influences that lead to their return to school. In terms of the factors that play an important role in keeping students in the school program, the two repeated factors included *family influence* and the influence of *personal goals*. The third factor that arose from the dialogues, *school environment,* mirrored the element mentioned in question two above. In short, multiple comments related to the levels of support provided at the school and a variety of program elements that sustain enrollment and create holding power defined this category.

Category 1: Family

First, the *family influences* mentioned by participants primarily revolved around factors related to parents and/or siblings. During the focus group sessions students shared various reflections about how important a role their parents played in keeping them from thinking about dropping out. In some instances students expressed why they were sticking with the program with very short and succinct answers like "for my parents" (African American Male, FG2 #6) without further explanation. Whether based on the threat of losing an inheritance or the chief desire to "not disappoint them" (Hispanic

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Male, FG3 #13), participants presented their parents as motivating factors in the quest to earn high school diplomas.

In addition to parental influence, the second family-related influence revolved around the siblings. Just as was the case in the roles that parents played in motivating participants to remain in school, so too did siblings purportedly provide such inspiration for sustaining enrollment through graduation. When discussing siblings, participants mainly identified younger brothers and sisters to be the source of influence. In connection with this fact those mentioning siblings as an influence also reflected a desire be a positive role model and make good impressions upon those younger brothers and sisters. Of additional note, participants naming siblings as influential factors also generally did so in conjunction with noting other sources of influence such as a parent or some goal-oriented focus.

Category 2: Personal Goals

Second, the influence of *personal goals* tended to provide many of the students with the fortitude to sustain the drive to complete high school. Revealed as a primary factor for continued enrollment, the ultimate personal goal of earning a high school diploma was stated multiple times by participants across the focus groups. While only one participant specifically mentioned the goal of improving future job potential, the vast majority of those who reveal personal ambitions as a factor directly focused on the immediate goal of earning the high school diploma. Several participants quickly responded to the question with the utterances "getting my diploma" and "graduating." In

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one case a young lady clearly states the ultimate sustaining objective with the response, "Just the final goal" (Female, FG3). Another participant sharing this personal goal of completing high school conveys a different take on the situation stating that the major factor is "Just trying to finish school [and] getting it over with" (Hispanic Male, FG4 #17). However stated, participants revealed clear intentions to complete high school throughout their discussions.

Category 3: School Environment

The last factor expressed by the students is centered on the role of the *school environment*. An abundance of feedback came in the form of descriptions of the nature of various aspects of the school environment that provided holding power. Specific elements about the school that were described included references to the supportiveness of staff and general happiness with membership in the *KKCS* school community. Furthermore, another response pattern that emerged revealed that some participants had not really given any thought to the prospect of dropping out at all since enrolling at *KKCS*. While difficult at times to discern whether such comments were literally stated or used more so to dramatize the importance of remaining enrolled for any number of reasons, several persons provided this feedback.

One of the essential dimensions of the school environment providing holding power from the participants' perspective is definitely the school staff. On many occasions students remarked about how appreciative they were to receive the level of help delivered to them by staff members. While uplifting staff as key players in keeping

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them enrolled through graduation, comments specifically identified that students perceived staff to be supportive and totally willing to "do anything to help you graduate" (Hispanic Female, FG5 #21). A student who had problems finding day care for her child gives one concrete example of support provided by a counselor during a potentially fatal time. During this account the student stated that she "was going to have to drop out… [until the counselor] found day care for [her with] the school paying for it" (Hispanic Female, FG6 #27). Teachers, counselors and administrators were all referenced at different points throughout the focus groups as students indicated reasons that staff members were important to them in their quest to continue through high school graduation.

Other aspects of the school environment to which participants ascribed the school's holding power included the common connection of the student body make-up, attendance rules and even the impact of the AmeriCorps program for at least one student. With regard to the school's student body, on several occasions participants noted that a common bond exists for students attending *KKCS*. Furthermore, because the commonality centers on the fact that all students had left (or dropped out of) schools, participants perceived that negative stigmas normally placed on such students is nonexistent at *KKCS*. As presented by one participant, a factor that plays a role in keeping him in the program is the perception "that everybody here has at least one thing wrong with them, we all have problems and we realize it. That's what I like about it" (Hispanic Male, FG1). Participants readily lifted the notion that the *KKCS* student bond was a unique aspect of the school.

Another element noted by participants about the student body is the supportive

and friendly nature of the students. Some participants specifically identified that a

discernable positive factor at *KKCS* is the fact that multiple cliques are not found within

the student body. Highlighting this phenomenon, a participant shares

> I've made all different types of friends here. There's nobody here that I dislike.
>
> So, I mean, there's just all kinds of different people here…. It's different here.
>
> It's like I don't really see cliques here too much. I mean, a little bit, but, for the
>
> most part it's not like it is in regular high school. I mean everybody really kind of
>
> associates with everybody. And if [it] seems like somebody has a problem with
>
> somebody, they can just stay away. (Anglo Male, FG6 #25)

Several members of at least one of the focus groups also collaborated in verifying that

students tend to provide a warm reception to new students to the program, which also

adds to a perceived sense of comfort for all students. Many times the gesture was noted

to be a simple, yet friendly, self-introduction or hello.

Finally, although less applicable to most of the students, a couple of participants

offered additional factors as important to sustained enrollment. While many students

discussed the positive role that the AmeriCorps program played in easing their re-

enrollment, only one participant noted the importance of the to keeping him enrolled at

KKCS. Beyond this, a couple of participants offered an additional source of support that

came to them by way of a school attendance rule. These participants explained that the

KKCS attendance rules push them to attend more frequently than they normally would

without such rules in place. In the cases when students presented this factor as important,

the participants shared a fear of removal from the program as a positive form of

encouragement.

CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION

Context is essential to understanding the core findings of the study. Therefore, it is imperative that a restatement of the aim of the study be provided prior to attempting to unravel and synthesize the suggestions that were offered by the students who participated in the study. An explicit and critical aspect of this research is the fact that I sought to break from the approach to understanding early school leavers that emphasizes deficit thinking, while simultaneously aiming to bring about a more balanced perspective by seeking to provide insights into systemic issues presented by students who opted to leave traditional public school educational systems prior to graduating.

The goal of this study was to create dialogue among students who decided to leave and later reenter high school in order to draw upon their experiences and reflections. To facilitate the critical dialogue sought by this study I employed a rich, yet somewhat underutilized, research methodology with the hope that the focus group context might empower the participants to expand our prior knowledge regarding early school departure and provide for elaboration of meaning (Bloor et al., 2001; Krueger, 1994). Via the use of focus groups it was hoped that the students might provide a set of rich data, provocative insights, and an illumination of potential institutional-related precursors to early school departure.

Ultimately then, the desired outcome sought by this study was to identify specific aspects about the school environment that may contribute to student decisions to leave or return to high school. Identification of such factors—contributing factors under the school's control—were of vital interest to this study, because aspects of the school

environments are those reported as best addressed by the schools versus factors

considered endogenous to students (Wehlage & Rutter, 1987). Keeping the end goal of

this study in mind, analysis of the research results proceeds.

Major Findings of the Study

Care

The most profound finding of the study was the fact that the participants

overwhelming articulated that they perceived "care"—that is, a school environment

systemically infused with an *ethic of care*—to be the most important aspect of school

holding power. This sentiment was expressed not only as the participants dialogued

about reasons for leaving school, but also while discussing reasons for returning to

school. When synthesizing student responses to the three focus group questions related

to their *reasons for leaving*, the theme of *care* is revealed as the most prominent factor

affecting early school departure both within and across the questions. Essentially the

dialogues reflected that, above all else, the students wanted to feel that the adults in the

schools they attended (teachers, counselors, and administrators alike) and the school

structures within which they were expected to function, exuded concern about their well

being. So, while it was true that the students engaged in this study verbalized that they

disliked many aspects of schools and the schooling processes they encountered, the

overarching theme emerging from their discussions was the theme of *care*. Not only was

this theme of care directly projected, but also interconnections between the nature of care

and the other four themes (i.e., relationships, school/class size, policies, and

professionalism) developed under this series of focus group questions were frequently

implied if not directly stated across focus groups.

Participant responses to the three questions centered on the participants' *reasons*

for returning to school portray significant factors contributing to decisions to return,

albeit to a non-traditional school environment. The interactions of these three questions

also underscore the importance of the nature of caring in schools as particularly unveiled

by participant responses under the thematic category of *school environment*. Touted as a

most critical influence in both easing reentry to school and sustaining enrollment,

essential elements at the center of the *school environment* category speak to the

importance of the nature of care in schools. As a reminder some of the critical features

under this category included participant descriptions of a school environment that

constituted a caring, respectful, supportive, and a family-like setting.

Information that the participants provide in relation to their perceptions about care

in schools validates and aligns with previous observations. First, the general negative

perception reported by several of the participants that teachers "do not care" is

commensurate with the results of a number of studies (Altenbaugh, Engel & Martin,

1995; Certo et al., 2003; Gallagher, 2002; Miron & Lauria, 1998; Saunders & Saunders,

2001; Valenzuela, 1999). As had been previously pointed out, the conclusion that there

is a lack of care is often drawn in instances when students encounter teachers who reveal

little compassion, and/or non-responsiveness (Saunders & Saunders, 2001), to their individual needs.

The finding that students felt a lack of care when they perceived that teachers did not hold them accountable and when teachers allowed students to perform at sub-par levels in the classroom (e.g., allowing students to do nothing at all—e.g., sleeping—to allowing minimal work to be completed) extends the existing evidence that matters of curriculum and pedagogy do in fact contribute to student perceptions about whether teachers care. These findings also buffer reports that students perceive teachers to be non-caring when they provide meaningless schoolwork (Hemmings, 2003); when they rely on heavy lecture approaches, focus on curriculum at the expense of who is being taught, or fail to provide adequate support for struggling students (Doucette, 2005); or when they do not thoroughly explain concepts, provide authentic and relevant learning opportunities, or attempt to connect with students (Certo et al., 2003). Another finding not characteristically appearing in the literature revolved around student expectations for teachers to live up to professional standards, like showing genuine care for and working with every student. Rarely are concerns such as these published in the dropout literature.

Finally, one other aspect of participant focus on 'care' in schools is of potential significance due to the fact that only some aspects of care were directly related to another category of focus—*relationships*—while others aspects of care were not. This is an important finding because within the current tide of high school reform, there is heavy focus on relationship development (NASSP, 2005), but less of a focus on the development of care. While participants expressed some clear implications that

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relationships had on care, they also distinguished that several critical aspects of care did not necessarily depend directly on relationships. Participants inform us that aspects of care that are not necessarily relationship-based may be just as prudent to infuse into the current change imperative. It is, however, extremely likely that the current focus on relationships assumes that many of the essential elements of what has been categorized within this study as 'care' are indeed spoken to via relationship building. However, the findings of this study caution us to consider additional aspects of school that may play just as significant a role, if not more significant roles, in creating student satisfaction and support for continued matriculation through high school.

Other Findings

Having provided a review and discussion of significant findings related to the overarching theme emerging form the study, it is appropriate to now present additional findings organized by the three guiding questions of the study. For clarity sake of clarity, it is prudent to remind the reader at this point that in the previous section (the "Results" Chapter) and throughout the immediately preceding sub-section, the discussion has centered on the six focus group questions (three related to *reasons for leaving* and three related to *reasons for return*) used during the study to facilitate each group discussions. Not to be confused with a discussion of the six focus group questions, the attention now turns to discussion of the results as they pertain to answering the three overarching and guiding questions of the study.

What do students dislike about school?

The responses to questions related to student dislikes offer fresh perspectives on early school departure, especially in terms of meeting the primary aim of providing elaborations of exactly what it was about the schools that students disliked. Dislikes that students commonly articulated tended to coalesce around five macro-themes: (1) Care, (2) Relationships, (3) School and Class Size, (4) School Policies, and (5) Professionalism. These findings alone are essential in that prior research has not necessarily directly sought to identify and articulate exactly what students dislike about school, not to mention attempting to do so from a student-centered perspective.

Main Dislikes

Of the multiple dislikes mentioned by students, several participants ultimately identified lack of teacher support, lack of teacher faith, and/or feeling that they had no advocates (e.g., no one cared) as the most influential factors in their decision to leave. While this particular finding focuses on what was lacking in schools and the end effects of not having critical support in place, it is congruent with research related to school success that specifies that caring and supportive adult figures in schools contribute to student success and academic resiliency (Franquiz & Salazar, 2004) and enhance student engagement (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005), and that the development of trusting student-teacher relationships create effective learning environments (Ennis & McCauley, 2002).

In terms of school relationships, participants of this study generally voiced a dislike for the relationships encountered in the schools. Specifically they described school relationships as weak, divisive or non-existent (Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Gallagher, 2002; Saunders & Saunders, 2001). Remarks made by participants concurred with prevalent school size and class size research findings. For example, difficulties in transitioning from smaller middle schools to larger high schools were expressed and are well represented in the literature (Gallagher, 2002; Roy & Swaminathan, 2002; Smith, 1997; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004; Schott et al., 1997). Similar to Certo, Cauley & Chaflin (2003), reports of stressful encounters during passing periods were echoed by participants who reflected on concerns they had regarding their experiences during passing periods at the larger schools they had previously attended. Participants also shared perceptions that as a result of large class sizes decreased opportunities for learning existed, which corresponds to previous observations (Hemmings, 2003; Vanderslice, 2004). Also corresponding with previous results (Finn & Voelkl, 1993), participants directly verbalized the belief that smaller is better in the case of school/class size.

Dislikes related to school policies initially generated a great deal of consensus (e.g., dislikes related to dress code, tardy, and in-school suspension disciplinary policies), but these dislikes were not identified as the issues that caused them to ultimately decide to leave high school. Nonetheless their articulations of general disfavor with a number of school policies echoes findings of reported by Wehlage & Rutter (1987) that high school dropouts negatively rated the effectiveness of discipline and the fairness of discipline in schools. Finally, these results also support previous research that revealed that school

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policies and practices similar to those reported by the participants dissuade student

engagement and negatively impact school continuation (Finn & Voelkl, 1993;

Lunenburg, 2000; Roy & Swaminathan, 2002).

In terms of professionalism participants shared concerns that teachers abuse

authority (Doucette, 2005), had poor attitudes and lacked sensitivity (which matches

aforementioned findings related to care), negatively stereotyped students (Certo, Cauley

& Chaflin, 2003; Miron & Lauria, 1998), and used ineffective teaching strategies

(Gallagher, 2002; Lunenburg, 2000). Expanding reports that students show respect for

teachers in response to instructional competence (Hemmings, 2003), participants

definitely identified a desire to be taught by persons who they recognized as "quality

teachers." Students also revealed awareness of circumstances when they were targeted

for being pushed out of the school system by teachers and/or administrators, which

affirms findings from previous studies (Altenbaugh, Engel & Martin, 1995; Kronick &

Hargis, 1990; Egyed, McIntosh & Bull, 1998; Gallagher, 2002; Morrow, 1987; West,

1991).

Also, comments focusing on the need to change instructional practices and

strategies in order to meet the needs of various types of learners aligns with feedback

offered by Certo, Cauley and Chafin (2003) that students prefer greater variety in

instruction, as well as more relevant and applied learning strategies (e.g., hands-on

learning). Further, the participants' recommendations for schools to make appropriate

changes in instruction in order to meet the needs of all students provides student

validation of a substantial body of related research regarding the significance of

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pedagogical practice to student success (Certo, Cauley & Chaflin, 2003; Daniels &

Arapostathis, 2005; Ennis & McCauley; Martin, Tobin & Sugai, 2002; NASSP, 2005;

Vanderslice, 2004).

What factors about the school lead to the students' to leave?

As the structure of the focus group questions moved from soliciting what might

be classified as broad student dislikes about their previous high school experiences to

then drawing out student perceptions of the very specific dislikes that contributed *most* to

their ultimate decision to leave school early, some interesting patterns were deduced. A

very intentional aim of the structure of the focus group questions, it was actually hoped

that students insights would ultimately lift the aspects of schools that they considered to

be most significant in contributing to their decisions to leave. As expected, the result of a

pattern of fading significance did emerge as the focus group discussions continued.   This

pattern occurred as the multiple initially identified dislikes (under a number of thematic

categories) prompted by the first and most general focus group question, faded in

significance when participants were further encouraged by the second question to reveal

the factors that *most* contributed to their decision to leave school early.

These response patterns of the participants provided an indication that, although

they all disliked many aspects of school each disliked aspect did not have the same

impact on early school departure decisions. In other words, some of the perceived

dislikes apparently have a greater tendency towards influencing early school departure

than others. This finding is of particular importance because it helps to unveil some of

the possible school-related dynamics and experiences that are perceived to be detrimental, especially to the point of influencing pathways to early withdrawal from high school.

Main Influences for Leaving

Many of the findings of the study support the notion that schools need to focus on development of relationships between adults and students in high schools. As alluded to earlier, one of the most significant findings with regard to relationships is the perception promoted by participants that relationships with adults in schools are directly associated with students feeling cared about. Participant accounts of the role that poor relationships played in students' decisions to leave highlight previous research that indicate that students sometimes leave school early due to feeling unwanted by school personnel (Egyed, McIntosh & Bull, 1998; Morrow, 1987; West, 1991). Several participants identified that critical qualities related to meaningful relationships were missing, which ultimately influenced their choice to leave school. The absence of supportive connections with adults in schools (Brown et al., 2003; Certo, Cauley & Chaflin, 2003; Gallagher, 2002; Miller-Cribbs et al., 2002) and lack of respect (Hemmings, 2003) have been found to contribute to difficulties that students experience in school.

Only one of the participants of the present study specifically voiced class size to be the primary reason for leaving school, which is somewhat contrary to the research that suggests that many students have been influenced to leave school due to this very reason (Fowler & Walberg, 1991). The contradictory finding is likely a result of differences in

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research design and/or focus of study, given that several participants indeed voiced that

larger school/class sizes were a 'disliked' characteristic of their former schools. In fact,

while offering recommendations for change it was clear that students overwhelmingly

perceived that smaller size plays a role in successful matriculation by potentially

enhancing relationships, teacher support capabilities, and reducing frustrations for all

involved. Furthermore, participant recommendations to reduce school size and to reduce

class size compliment the current literature (Alspaugh, 1997; Certo, Cauley & Chaflin,

2003; Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Hemmings, 2003; Martin, Tobin

& Sugai, 2002; May & Copeland, 1998; Saunders & Saunders, 2001; Somers, 1997).

What motivated the students to return to school?

Information gleaned from the discussions spawned by participant's reasons for

returning to school provides fresh insights into various factors that motivate students.

This question is particularly unique, because the information explicitly sought by this

study regarding the nature of student return to school has been often times either

overlooked or underestimated in previous literature. Very infrequently is information

such as this included in "dropout" literature, which is possibly due to the fact that the

predominate focus of the research and literature relies on the inspection of variables

attributed to identifying common characteristics of so-called "dropouts." Reversing this

common trend, this study purposefully embedded the opportunity for students who are

often deemed inadequately suited to complete requirements for graduation from high

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school, to challenge existing assumptions regarding the desires, hopes, and aspirations of these young people.

The responses provided by the students of this study primarily debunk myths and preconceived notions that endogenous issues necessarily create a debilitating effect on student ability and/or desire to successfully matriculate through high school. Directly refuting this myth and lending credence to the notion that school practices and policies are sometimes based on "pseudoscience" (Leahey, 1992), the participants detail a variety of factors that prompted their return to school. Equally the students communicated important factors that they perceived to drive their continued matriculation. As an indirect consequence of these dialogues, participants present some insights into the disposition of the motivational factors that played a role in their reenrollment.

Some of the motivating factors seemed to be based on internal drives (e.g., personal goal set to earn a high school diploma; goal orientation towards post-secondary education and/or career aspirations), while others appeared to be externally driven (e.g., parental influences for reentry and completion; elements of the school). Of these, the factors related to the school where the participants were enrolled that made the proposition to reenter school, and remain enrolled, more attractive is of particular value. While it is not being argued here that the school environment alone necessarily induced student decisions to return, it is being argued that it may be important to take note of systemic structures within the schooling environment that students certainly perceived to ease student decisions to return and stay. From a very practical stand point the participants inform us of the aspects of at least one school (*KKCS*) that created a needs-

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satisfying environment, thusly providing clues to possible systemic support structures that are beneficial to students commonly considered at-risk.

As discussed further in the subsections to follow, the participants not only provided pertinent information about elements of school environments that might make the school at-risk of losing students, but they also projected information regarding aspects of schools that support students. As mentioned previously, when considering the line of questioning asked of the participants during the focus groups the aforementioned patterns are not surprising.   In some respect the responses may even seem intuitive. Most important to this study, however, the participants' response patterns are significant in that they provide meaningful insight into a number of critical factors that potentially motivate, mitigate, and/or sustain students in their quests to reenter and complete high school.

Main Influences for Return

The main reasons for returning to high school included: the influential powers of family members (especially parents and siblings); the desire to meet personal goals that students had set to graduate from high school, which in many cases also related to meeting additional post-secondary education and career goals; an understanding that high school graduation correlated to enhanced opportunities for future success; peer influences that occurred both directly (peer encouragement to reenroll) and indirectly (self comparisons to peers who graduated on time); school environment; school structure (e.g., daily schedule); the AmeriCorps program; and, boredom (i.e., feeling a lack of personal satisfaction) while out of school due to having no sense of purpose. Under each of these

eight categories of response (family, personal goals, increased future opportunities, peers, school environment, school structure, AmeriCorps, and boredom) various rationales were provided for return, but in all cases the intentionality of the decision was apparent. Many of the motivating factors outlined by the students were commensurate with existing literature. In fact, with the exception of the theme of "boredom" that emerged, the other categories that developed are more common.

For example, family and peer influences reported by participants match the former finding of Hayes et al. (2002) that in the greater context of society, students may be met with disapproval from family and peers if they are dropouts. Additionally, current findings are consistent with the evidence provided by Gallagher (2002) and Miller-Cribbs et al. (2002) that family members (e.g., parent and sibling influences) are critical in supporting and driving dropouts to strive for graduation. In all participant reports of the powerful impact that their family members had on their decisions to return to school line up nicely with previously reported findings in the literature.

Another significant related finding was that the students overwhelmingly communicated a specific desire to earn a high school diploma as opposed to any alternative method of high school completion, such as completion via earning a GED. This decision was intentional as all participants expressed perceptions that the value of a high school diploma was much higher than that of a GED. While an astute revelation on the part of the participants given some of the earnings projections for person who graduate with diploma versus a GED, this observation may result from subtle nuances of the school program. On the other hand, at the time of the study students were provided

the option of graduating from *KKCS* by way of completing the GED, yet all of the participants of the study opted to strive for the traditional high school diploma. Unfortunately, no additional evidence to confirm whether a nuance of the program nudges students towards one form of high school completion over the other is available through this study.

The vehemently expressed personal goal of earning a high school diploma as a key motivator for students correlates with previous research that has documented similar evidence that dropouts maintain a longing for a diploma and understanding the value of a diploma (Gallagher, 2002). However, one of the assertions of that particular study was that the informants of the study did not connect the value of a diploma to enhanced job potential or quality of life (Gallagher, 2002). This particular finding is indeed contrary to the report of the participants of this focus group study as well as the results of other studies that highlight the personal drive and value for the high school diploma (Miron & Lauria, 1998; Miller-Cribbs, et al., 2002). Additional discussion of related findings with regard to the school environment, school structure, and the AmeriCorps program is found in the following subsection, which focuses on specific elements of the *KKCS* schooling environment.

Influences of the Current School

Participant descriptions of essential aspects of *KKCS* that made return to school easier are of significance in that while they are program specific responses, the comments provide insight into the potential mechanisms by which schools might

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encourage the recovery of students who have previously left. For example, the positive, supportive, and welcoming environment of *KKCS* created by teachers and counselors was vastly touted as a key difference that created ease in returning. Anchoring prior descriptions of students' perceptions of current alternative school settings versus former traditional school settings, the results of the study reinforce previous findings that it is the common tendency of students to perceive the new school environment as significantly better at all levels of interaction (Saunders & Saunders, 2001).

This tendency has been partially explained by the fact that alternative environments are perceived to provide more personalization and relationship development, which is definitely mirrored by participant reports. Participant praise of the levels of teacher and counselor caring, respect, support and willingness to work with all students was also expressed to contribute to creating the more welcoming atmosphere. These reactions match the research as well. For example, the great appreciation expressed by many participants for the levels of responsiveness displayed by the counselors at *KKCS* directly correlates to the findings of Saunders & Saunders (2001).

Smallness of the school and class sizes was offered as critical components of a caring school structure that eased the decision to return. In step with the notion that small school size and class size creates a better "ambience for learning" (Sommers, 1997), the participants' favorable outlook on school and classroom smallness matches results commonly expressed elsewhere in the literature (Finn & Voelkl, 1993; Fowler & Walberg, 1991; Hemmings, 2003; NASSP, 2004; Saunders & Saunders, 2001).   Beyond size, reports by students of the prominent role of flexibility in organizational structure—

length of school day, integrated courses, and accelerated learning opportunities, participants found it easier to return to school—compliments results of other research that highlight such variables as critical for success (Doucette, 2005).

Akin to the school-to-work transition structure, which is purported to improve school success (Martin, Tobin & Sugai, 2002), the AmeriCorps program at *KKCS* was reported to provide a special gateway opportunity for the students involved in the study. This unique opportunity follows patterns of community-based service learning. On numerous occasions participants readily proclaimed that this particular program component greatly eased school reentry, especially due to the dual financial and academic needs that are met through the program all at the school location.

Discussion surrounding the nature of the AmeriCorps program is of special significance because it is the most unique finding under this category. Evidently the additional opportunity to earn money while working in a school-related program provided a great deal of added motivation for the majority of participants. Almost every student engaged in the study mentioned multiple benefits afforded by the AmeriCorps program, including the opportunity to attend school during half of the day and work the other half of the day, the opportunity to earn a paycheck, and the opportunity to receive scholarship money towards post-secondary education. Absent from current literature, students made clear the overwhelming effectiveness of this particular program model in encouraging reenrollment. This finding perhaps provides significant insight into how schools might recover students via use of programs that afford similar kinds of opportunities.

Lastly, many participants mentioned the powerful impact of experiences encountered during the school's unique transition program. A very school-community inclusive orientation program held with great regularity throughout the year in order for acclimate new students to the culture of the school, participants reported this program to be a primary encouragement for entering the *KKCS* community. This influential power as described by the participants reiterates findings regarding the positive impact of transition programs on high school retention, especially when key stakeholders (e.g., students, parents, and committed school staff) are present (Smith, 1997).

Influences on Continued Matriculation

Participant responses regarding factors that played an important role in keeping them enrolled remained fairly consistent with responses to primary influences that lead them to decide to return to school. As in that case, the related literature previously noted (under the heading "Main Influences for Return") remains commensurate with participant feedback provided under this section—in terms of the influences of parents and siblings, and the desire to meet the personal goal of graduating. Similarly, variables related to school environment, which too were espoused earlier by participants under the immediate past section that delved into the things related to the current school that were different and made reentry easier, remain supported by the previously identified literature.

On the other hand, one feature not connected with any of the student's original motivating factors for return, centered on the nature of the new school environment. On several occasions participants focused comments on several strengths that they perceived

to be unique to the *KKCS* school environment (especially in relation to prior experience) that allowed them to thrive and supported continued enrollment. A commonly identified element of *KKCS*, for example, that was perceived to provide holding power according to the participants was the extremely high levels of supportiveness provided by school staff. Students shared the perception that staff members went above and beyond the call of duty to ensure the success of each and every student with great regularity. The frequent references made regarding the high levels support provided by staff in addition to other comments that revealed perceptions of adult commitment to students, matched practices noted in the literature that encourage student persistence in high school through graduation (Robledo Montecel, Cortez & Cortez, 2004).

Additionally students ascribed continued enrollment to other dynamics of the school environment, particularly noting the friendliness and connectedness of the student body. The participants' comments acknowledged the supportive nature of the student body, while also identifying a very unique quality about the school. Specifically, participants maintained that no cliques existed at the school due to the overarching commonality of each student's plight as a former "dropout" currently attempting to graduate. This uniquely identified characteristic supports and expands upon a previous assertion that alternative school settings have an extraordinary ability in creating success via forming what is referred to as a "common-bond learning community" (Saunders & Saunders, 2001).

Enhanced Understanding via Focus Groups

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It is important to state that via the use of focus group research participants were empowered to articulate specific aspects of high school experiences that they disliked, while expanding our current understanding of the dynamics of the school environments and processes that may contribute to early school departure and return. This is significant in that previously the majority of research related to high school departure featured the use of surveys, questionnaires and other quantitative methods that generated data sets based on fixed, pre-conceived constructs, which arguably produce limited results in some instances. As a case in point early "dropout" research typically provides multiple correlates as findings, which generally lack deeper explication as to the complexities and/or nuances of those findings. Moreover, the research tendency that followed early research featured and further codified such correlates, while further neglecting opportunities for expanding our understandings of the nature of early school departure. Consequently a seemingly ongoing cycle of dropout research steeped in deficit thinking resulted and continues to define and/or provide primary descriptions of the tendencies of the early school leaver even today.

Through the focus group context of this study, which created "voice" (Miron & Lauria, 1998) for the students, findings related to dislikes for school that have previously gone under acknowledged, if acknowledged at all, were generated. It appears that the context for the -focus groups of this study were ripe, given the fact that the students in attendance at the school from which the target population was selected all possessed an essential commonality—they were all openly considered to be recovered dropouts. As such, the participants were naturally primed and knowledgeable, and furthermore they

were extremely willing to participate. This factor too is significant to the study because it lends credence to the potential efficacy of focus group research under circumstances where participants are personally knowledgeable of the issues and reasonably homogenous (Krueger, 1994), as determined by the issues under study—e.g., early school leavers.

The Impact of the *Keep Kids Charter School* Approach

On numerous occasions throughout the focus group dialogues participants regularly reported information related to their positive experiences at *KKCS*. Their retrospections were frequently filled with comparisons between experiences at former schools and *KKCS* and the use of juxtapositions proved commonplace as a method of conveying perceptions of what was disliked and liked, and/or those variables that students found good, bad and ugly about schools. In the final analysis their deliberations and comparisons clearly demarked perceived differences in the caring nature of the staff in the *KKCS* school environment versus the staff in other previous environments. The shared perceptions revealed by students regarding their positive, caring school experiences at *KKCS* serve to highlight the efficacy of the *ethic of care* (Noddings, 1984), or *educación* (Valenzuela, 1999), when systemically operationalized in school. Deservedly, therefore, additional comment is warranted on perceived impacts of the *KKCS* schooling experience.

As in the case of many participant perspectives voiced in this study, it is not uncharacteristic of students to identify former school environments as inhospitable

(Gallagher, 2002) or as non-caring. As previously noted, this finding also aligns with

prior research that indicates that students attending alternative school settings have

compared former with current learning environments and reported perceiving greater

responsiveness and care in the newer environment (Saunders & Saunders, 2001). One

critical aspect of this study with regard to these findings is the fact that as in the case in

the latter study, these participants likewise had exited traditional school environments and

entered an alternative school environment—namely, *KKCS*. The concurrence of these

findings suggest that special features of alternative school structures, like those touted by

the participants, may play a significant role in enhancing their experiences in schools.

Many of these features apparently are absent in most traditional environments and

therefore may prove informative to school enhancement strategies.

Perhaps partially a direct function of the mission and values of the school and

therefore the tacit guide for actions of the school faculty/staff, the fact that students drew

comparisons between *KKCS* and former schools in order to clarify understandings is

instructive. Furthermore, consistent iterations of the positive aspects of *KKCS* are

enlightening in that the participants illuminate potentially powerful and informative

impacts of the school design. Students were particularly certain that as opposed to the

former school environments that they opted to leave, the *KKCS* school environment

provided them with the option and opportunity to attend a high school that was perceived

to: provide an environment that was genuinely welcoming, positive, supportive, and

respectful; provide learning experiences that matched the needs of the learners in terms of

curriculum and pedagogical practices; and, provide learning opportunities in favorable daily structures that met the needs of students.

Instead of the negative experiences revealed by the participants as they discussed previous schools, students expressed that differences in the manner in which *KKCS* staff interacted with and supported them provided direct evidence that "they care" and that students are the "priority." Similarly, when discussing school relationships participants again emphasized characteristics of preferred kinds of relationships by using *KKCS* staff as the benchmark. This same pattern unfolded continuously throughout each focus group conversation when students were prompted to discuss items related to their leaving, returning, and continuing in school since returning. At all times much focus was devoted to aspects of *KKCS* that created a new, refreshing, and seemingly more sustainable high school experience for the participants. In short a caring environment was projected as a key difference in the current versus former school environment.

Many aspects of the *KKCS* environment lifted throughout the focus groups are emphasized in the literature. For example, the reappearance of participant suggestions that more caring environments are developed via more personal teacher-student communications and interactions, a show of increased respect for students, relationship building, teacher enthusiasm toward the job of teaching, and the promotion of student voice (feeling heard/listened to) corresponds with research that highlights the positive school effects associated with: increased interpersonal contact with students (Doucette, 2005; Ennis & McCauley, 2002; Saunders & Saunders, 2001); increased respect (Franquiz & Salazar, 2004), teacher enthusiasm (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005), and the

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allowance for greater student input (student voice) in their schooling (Miron & Lauria, 1998). Furthermore, the characteristics of positive relationships that they described based on experiences in their new school environment aligned with characteristics acknowledged in the research related to enhancement of student success, including elaborations on proactive involvement and meaningful interactions, the development of personal bonds, and supportiveness (Daniels & Arapostathis, 2005; May & Copeland, 1998; Miller-Cribbs et al., 2002; Somers & Piliawsky, 2004; Vanderslice, 2004). The common characterization offered by participants of their teacher as a 'friend' is commensurate with related research (Miron & Lauria, 1998; Roy & Swaminathan, 2002).

Finally, past research is also echoed by the expectations shared by participants that adults in schools should proactively develop meaningful personal relationships (Franquiz & Salazar, 2004; Hayes et al., 2002; Lunenburg, 2000; Saunders & Saunders, 2001; Wehlage et al., 1989) and engender relationships based on mutual respect (Brown et al., 2003; Doucette, 2005; Hemmings, 2003; Martin, Tobin & Sagai, 2002). Learning environments that encompass characteristics recommended by the participants, namely an ambiance of comfort (Ennis & McCauley, 2002), relationships that are more like friendships (Roy & Swaminathan, 2002), and proactive involvement of students and parents (Jodry, Robles-Pena & Nitcher, 2004; Martin, Tobin & Sagai, 2002; Robledo Montecel, Cortez & Cortez, 2004) have all been previously considered effective educational practices.

The proposition regarding the development of more personalized relationships— specifically, participants recommended that relationships more like friendships need to be

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established in schools—particularly stands out, because this recommendation breaches a topic that is generally considered taboo in the field of education. Using reference points from their current school experiences, the participants expressed possibilities as to how such a paradigm shift might occur (e.g., being on first-name basis with teachers and teacher establishment of deeper interpersonal relationships with students). Generally, such extreme levels of personalization are frowned upon in formal school systems, but the reports of the participants indicate that the possibility of creating respectable relationships of this nature exists in the presence of a willingness to take different approach is present.

In closing it should be mentioned that with regard to the participants' points of reference that placed *KKCS* as the benchmark for comparison when describing dislikes of former schools there is no doubt that the students were highly critical of former schools. It seemed apparent that experiences at *KKCS* influenced there current understandings and it is questionable whether students would have provided the same commentary if they were not enrolled at *KKCS*. For example, student encounters with differentiated teaching strategies and learning structures definitely shaped responses as these experiences created new points of reference that the students might not have otherwise possessed. Regardless of whether operating from a combination of former experience and newfound insights during the focus group dialogues, participants provide detailed feedback that assists in expanding current understandings of early school departure, as well as possibilities for recovery and sustained enrollment through graduation.

Summary

To be sure when taken in entirety, the dialogues generated by the participants accentuate the previously generated finding that school leavers report many causes of early school departure (McDill, Natriello, & Pallas, 1985). However, these results expand upon this finding in a number of ways. For example, findings of this study further enhance the current body of knowledge regarding why students leave school early by providing clarifications of potential school characteristics that place students at risk of dropping out (Supick & Johnson, 1999). The results of this study expand prior literature by not only offering insights into some of the rationale as to why students leave, but also by providing reflections regarding why students return to and stay in school, which bends the current dominant paradigm that is based on deficit thinking and tends to relegate students to a more deprived statuses—e.g., "dropouts" and "at risk" students.

Building on previous studies that reported a primary reason for early school departure (a.k.a. dropping out of school) to be "disliking school" (Ekstrom et al., 1987; Orr, 1987; Tanner, Krahn, & Hartnagel, 1995), the format of this study elicited clarification from students about what exactly it was that they *disliked* about school. Furthermore, students provided unique details about their own motivations for returning, which consisted on both internal and external factors, as well as offering insight into very critical aspects of a school environment that is perceived as most crucial to creating an inviting atmosphere and sustaining school enrollment. The overarching element lifted by students was the centrality of an ethic of care in schools.

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Limitations

Employing the method of focus group research to collect data is not an error-free or a value-free process. Indeed, the use of focus groups has been acknowledged in the literature to present a few particular challenges. As in the case of any research methodology special challenges can be overcome. In the case of this study, protection against the concerns previously alluded to was achieved via the application of appropriate practices, procedures, and methodologies indicated in the <u>Methods</u> section.

To the argument that focus group research may afford less control to the researcher, it must be stated that this concern is most valid instances when total control is desired. However, the purpose of using this research methodology is often to actually allow for a transfer of control from researcher to the participants. In fact, to a large extent the primary objective of conducting focus groups is to allow the participants to play off of one another and to create a synergistic dynamic that will allow for participants to more freely voice their perspectives within the context of the group conversation. Therefore, this potential limitation (e.g., lack of control) may actually be deemed a strength (Morgan, 2002) of the methodology.

Attempts to address potential limitations related to data analysis were tackled by employing the technique of moderator-as-analyst in order to enhance the accuracy of the analysis. As a positive, the principal researcher of the study had prior experience in moderating and analyzing focus groups comprised of both children and adults. Even so, some of the normal difficulties of data analysis arose during times when participants spoke at the same time making transcription somewhat difficult. However, the transcript analysis, coding, and identification of common themes occurred based on understandable data. Furthermore, the audio tapes were of high quality and only

on occasion did it become difficult to understand the information provided.

The research design did not allow for the hosting of multiple focus groups consisting of pre-determined participant demographic arrangements (e.g., by sex, ethnicity, age). In addition to this fact, only students between the ages of 18 – 19 years participated in the study. A more inclusive group of participants (e.g., younger than 18 and older than 19), may have created a more expansive or even a different set of categories. Likewise, opportunities to control focus group compositions and run additional sets of homogeneous and heterogeneous groups may have provided a set of additional insights and thematic categories than currently accounted for by the study. While it indeed has been proposed in the literature that possible sources for group differences relate to participant age, sex, and level of education (Greenbaum, 2000; Krueger, 1994), it appears that the demographics of the focus groups may have turned out to be appropriate and favorable for this particular exploratory study.

Future Research

The findings of the study suggest that continued pursuits aimed at gaining richer understandings of the reasons why students leave and the mechanisms by which schools may assist students in opting to leave school early is warranted. Given the exploratory nature of this study, the findings can not be generalized to other populations. However, based on the success of the method in extending previous findings it is recommended that use of focus group research to study issues related to early school departure continue. Findings elicited and conclusions drawn from such studies may become highly informative to shifts required within the traditional schooling process in order to better respond to needs of students.

To be certain occasions when student voice has been predominate in related research is

sparse. Yet the field might greatly benefit from an ongoing series of similar studies of this nature,

especially given the tendency of qualitative methods (e.g., focus group research) to shift the

paradigm away from the more commonly utilized deficit-based research models. Moreover, future

studies of this sort should be designed to include more highly defined sets of predetermined

heterogeneous and homogeneous participant focus groups. Continued research of this nature will

not only continue to tap into a reservoir of principally underutilized knowledge, but based on the

strengths of the method it may significantly broaden and deepen understanding by bringing new

levels of clarity to previously generated constructs.

Placed alongside the findings of Saunders and Saunders (2001) with regard to student

satisfaction in alternative education settings, the overwhelming levels of appreciation voiced by

participants of this study regarding the nature of the schooling environment and the sense of

community developed at *KKCS*, suggests the need for future research to focus on identifying

central aspects of non-traditional schools that create need-satisfying conditions. Delineation of

distinct variables persistently found in alternative schools that effectively support students that tend

to be marginalized and often excised from traditional school settings would prove instructive in

facilitating more supportive environments for all students.

Also, given the continued predominant use of deficit thinking in the exploration

and explanation of early school departure, and the ongoing identification of presumed

endogenous factors for early student departure from high school, an attempt to inspect the

intrinsic or extrinsic nature of the reported influences for leaving school and returning

deserves future research. In this particular case the intent might be to deduce whether the

nature of the influences, more specifically the motivating factors shared by the

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participants, more or less stem from internal or external factors. Noting whether

motivating influences tend to lie within or outside of the participants might prove to be of

great practical value, yet the literature commonly stops short of attempting to specifically

elucidate motivational directionality. Therefore, it is recommended that greater focus be

placed on a more in-depth identification, analysis, and detailed articulation of the related

intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Doing so may potentially providing greater insights into

how schools may better support and sustain the enrollment of all students may result.

Finally, it is recommended that the information gleaned from this study as well as future

focus group research be used to formulate and improve surveys regarding the nature of early high

school departure. These newly designed surveys would then create opportunities to gather

quantitative data associated with this ongoing dilemma via use of survey research designs in future.

To close it is also recommended that future research use mixed methods in order to further enhance

findings and conclusions drawn from such critical studies.

APPENDICES

Appendix A: Dropout Statistics

Percent of High School Dropouts (Status Dropouts) Among Persons 16 to 24 Years Old, by Sex and Race/Ethnicity: 1960 to 2001						
		Sex		Race/Ethnicity		
Year	Total	Men	Women	White, non-Hispanic	Black, non-Hispanic	Hispanic origin
1960 [1]	27.2	27.8	26.7	-	-	-
1970	15.0	14.2	15.7	13.2 [2]	27.9 [2]	-
1980	14.1	15.1	13.1	11.4	19.1	35.2
1985	12.6	13.4	11.8	10.4	15.2	27.6
1990	12.1	12.3	11.8	9.0	13.2	32.4
1995 [3]	12.0	12.2	11.7	8.6	12.1	30.0
1996 [3]	11.1	11.4	10.9	7.3	13.0	29.4
1997 [3]	11.0	11.9	10.1	7.6	13.4	25.3
1998 [3]	11.8	13.3	10.3	7.7	13.8	29.5
1999 [3]	11.2	11.9	10.5	7.3	12.6	28.6
2000 [3]	10.9	12.0	9.9	6.9	13.1	27.8
2001 [3]	10.7	12.2	9.3	7.3	10.9	27.0

[1] Based on the April 1960 decennial census.

[2] White and Black include persons of Hispanic origin.

[3] Because of changes in data collection procedures, data may not be compatible with figures for earlier years.

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2003)

Appendix B: Leaver Reason Codes

		Completed High School Program
01*		Graduated
19*		Completed graduation requirements except passing the exit-level TAAS
31*		Completed GED
63*		Graduated previously, returned to school, left again
64*		Completed GED previously, returned to school, left again
		Moved to Other Educational Setting
28*		Intent to enroll in a public school in Texas
29*		Intent to enroll in a private school in Texas
73*		No intent but documented enrollment in a public school in Texas
74*		No intent but documented enrollment in a private school in Texas
07*		Intent to enroll in a school out of state
06*		No intent but documented enrollment school out of state
21*		Official transfer to another Texas public school district
22*		Alternative program working toward a GED
72*		Alternative program by court order
70		Alternative program not in compliance with compulsory attendance
71		Alternative program not working toward a GED or diploma
60*		Withdrew from home schooling
24*		Entered college early to pursue a degree
25		Entered college but not pursuing degree
		Withdrawn by district
17*		Expelled for criminal behavior
26		Expelled for reasons other than criminal behavior
62*		Withdrawn for non-residence or falsified enrollment information
67*		Withdrawn for failure to provide immunization records
		Other Reasons – School Related
11		Withdrew/left school because of low or failing grades
12		Withdrew/left school because of poor attendance
13		Withdrew/left school because of language problems
27		Withdrew/left school because of TAAS failure
14		Withdrew/left school because of age
		Other Reasons – Job Related
02		Withdrew/left school to pursue a job
04		Withdrew/left school to join the military
		Other Reasons – Family Related
08		Withdrew/left school because of pregnancy
09		Withdrew/left school because of marriage
15		Withdrew/left school due to homelessness/non-permanent residency
66*		Removed from the district by Child Protective Services
		Other Reasons
03*		Student died
10		Withdrew/left school due to alcohol or other drug abuse problem
16*		Returned to home country
30*		Withdrew/left school to enter a health care facility
61*		Incarcerated in a facility outside the boundaries of the district
65		Did not return to school after completing a JJAEP term
99		Other (unknown or not listed)

Appendix C: Common Dropout Terminology

Term	Definition	Literary Sources
Pushouts	Expelled students; disruptive students; undesirable students; rightfully or not, perceive the school as and/or its personnel as hostile	Altenbaugh, Engel & Martin, 1995; Kronick & Hargis, 1990; Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998; Morrow, 1987; West, 1991
Dropbacks	Those dropouts who resume their schooling	Altenbaugh, Engel & Martin, 1995
Stopouts	Dropouts who returned to school, usually within the same academic year	Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998; Morrow, 1987; West, 1991
Fadeout	Decision to leave school does not occur at a particular time; a less conscious choice	Altenbaugh, Engel & Martin, 1995
Easeout	Abandons schooling with administrative or teacher encouragement	Altenbaugh, Engel & Martin, 1995
Disaffiliates	Students no longer wishing to be associated with the schools	Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998; Morrow, 1987; West, 1991
Educational mortalities	Students failing to complete the program	Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998; Morrow, 1987; West, 1991
Capable dropouts	Family socialization did not agree with school demands	Egyed, McIntosh, & Bull, 1998; Morrow, 1987; West, 1991
Quiet or invisible dropouts	Stoic students that go unnoticed until they drop out; low achievers who experience continued failure	Kronick & Hargis, 1990
Estranged youth	Often poor, minority students who have fallen far behind in school; considered failures in school and outside	Hahn, Danzberger, & Lefkowitz, 1987

Appendix D: Potential Participant Letter

May 13, 2002

Dear *KKCS* Student:

I would like to invite you to participate in a study about why students leave school and why they return. My name is Sean Haley and I am a graduate student at the University of Texas at Austin. I am interested in hearing directly from students about the things that they specifically disliked about the schools they left early and also the reasons they decided to return to school. My goal is to use the information from this study to better understand student perceptions about the schools they decide to leave early and the many challenges that students face in staying in school.

Some questions you will be asked focus on your experience and perceptions about that school, while other questions will focus on the things that motivated you to return to school and your current experiences. I will not be asking you any specific personal questions. I simply want to find out about students' perceptions so that we can obtain a better portrait of how students view schools when faced with the possibility of dropping out. In addition, I would like to obtain some basic information about you, like your age, ethnicity, gender, and experiences you may have had with dropping out before high school. Finally, I would like to access withdrawal records from your last school in order to report the reasons that schools say students leave.

None of this information will be used to directly identify you. All of the information will be kept in the strictest confidence and will hopefully be used to help educators and policy makers better design schools, programs, and policies that are more sensitive to the needs of all students. I hope that you feel this is an important topic and I believe that you will enjoy sharing your thoughts and perceptions, while offering valuable insights into the views of students that have to gone through the early school departure experience. As a student who is at least 18 years old and currently attending the *Keep Kids Charter School*, you have the unique opportunity to participate in this study. All students cannot participant in this study and I am relying on a small group to provide me with the information I am seeking. Participation in this study is completely voluntary. Whether or not you participate in this study, future relations with the University of Texas or the *Keep Kids Charter School* will not be affected.

If you give permission to participate in this study, you will receive a call in order to verify a focus group session time that best fits your schedule. I will conduct the focus group along with an assistant. It will last about 1 to 1½ hours and will take place at the school during school hours. As a small token of appreciation I will arrange for snacks (food/beverage) to be available at the focus group session for all participants to enjoy!

If you are willing to participate in this study, I will need you to sign the attached consent form. Your signature represents your consent to participate in a focus group session and your permission to release school records. Only authorized persons from the University of Texas at Austin and the Institutional Review Board have the legal right to review your research records and will protect the confidentiality of those records to the extent permitted by the law. If the research project is sponsored then the sponsor has the legal right to review your research records. Otherwise, your research records will not be released without your consent unless required by law or a court order.

Please do not hesitate to call me (476 – 4297) if you have any questions or concerns. I look forward to seeing with you.

Sincerely,

Sean A. Haley, M.Ed.
Doctoral Student in Educational Psychology
University of Texas at Austin

Appendix E: Focus Group Questions

Decision to Leave Questions:

1.   What are all of the things that you disliked about your last school that contributed to your decision to leave? Remember, I would like you to be as specific as possible. [Record responses on a flip chart.]

Potential Probes
-    *Was there anything in particular about the school environment that contributed to your decision to leave? (Potential probes—Did you feel welcome? Did you feel included? Were you treated fairly?)*
-    *Was there anything in particular about the classes that turned you off about learning at the school you attended? (Potential probes—Did the staff at your school make you feel like you could be successful? Where the classes challenging/exciting/boring?)*
-    *Was there anything in particular about the teachers, counselors, administrators, or others that contributed to your decision to leave?*

2.   Keeping in mind all the things you have stated that you disliked [use a flip chart] which would you say had the most influence on your decision to leave?

3.   Based on your experiences, what recommendations would you make to the staff at those schools you decided to leave so that they can make corrections in order to keep students in school?

Decision to Return Questions:
Now I would like to focus on the decisions each of you made to return to school. There are probably a lot of influences in our lives that lead us to want to complete school by earning a high school diploma or GED. Again, I would like to hear from you about your specific experiences.

4.   What are the main influences that have lead you to decide to return to school?

5.   Are there particular things about your current high school that are different from the high school you left that made your decision to return to school any easier?

6.   If you have thought about dropping out since entering this program, what factors play an important role in keeping you here in this school program?

Appendix F: Reasons for Leaving - Care

Category – Care				
Statement	Group	Race	Sex	Person
…I am a slow learner in math. I used to be like we'll I don't understand it. They were like "Well, you're not paying attention," and I'm telling you that I don't understand, you know…They will have an excuse as your not listening so your punished an you won't work today, blah, blah, blah. So they will make you behind even more, instead of, you know, putting in a little…	1	H	F	5
I mean teachers, and some of the teachers not all of them…like especially Mrs. X, she was an Algebra teacher. I would ask her questions and sincerely, she would tell me, well, I don't have time for you right now…	1	H	F	4
Teachers [here] are totally different from our [old] teachers… (Moderator: How so?) …They care.	1	H	M	1
They help you more at this school than they did at, like, other schools. At my last high school, it was like the teachers wouldn't help me at all with my homework or anything like that. Even if I asked.	2	W	M	10
Whenever I would go, I wouldn't get any help from my teachers with any assignments, and like, they'd act like I wasn't even there, so why be there in the first place?	2	W	M	8
It was totally easy to go out back and smoke [drugs], and there would be hall monitors directing you.	2	H	M	7
I dropped out within two months…At the time I'd say there was nothing the school could do, you know? It was up to me to find out what's life all about…. But I guess like…if there was somebody there to be there, like if there was a class in school just to talk about drugs and all this. If somebody had been there and done that. I don't know, just to make somebody feel comfortable, like, you know, you can get through this…. If it was somebody like that I think kids like us, you know, somebody would have stayed in school…	2	AA	M	6
It's like they just want to get rid of you, you know what I'm saying? Like they don't even want to give him a chance right here. It kind of frustrates him.	2	AA	M	6
It seems like they respect us here [at *KKCS*]. At a public school, you know, it's just like I don't know, they're old people or something. I can't explain it. But it seems like the teachers and all the people here, you know, just respect you.	2	W	M	10

Everybody was nice. Like when I first walked into this school to find our guys, I was greeted by somebody and they told me all about it and everything…It just made me feel like, I guess, important….If I were to walk into my other school, there's no way anybody would talk to me.	2	W	M	8
Yeah, if you're not here they call you. But they're not strict, like, they won't send cops to your door.	2	W	M	8
…they just want to make sure that you're like, here and, you know, [that] you get your stuff done.	2	W	M	9
…the teachers don't care.

Every day I went to my Geometry class, I would fall asleep for the two hours. | 3 | H | M | 13 |
| As long as they are getting paychecks. (Statement made immediately after another participant remarked that "Teachers don't care.")

You could sit in the back the whole time and stare into space and they wouldn't talk with you. | 3 | W | F | 14 |
They don't care if you don't come to class or if you're late or if you do your work, anything.	3	H	F	11
…it's the same thing they've been saying, you know. You go to class, the teachers don't really care, you pretty much do whatever you want…	3	H	F	12
I walk into class here and its like, "Hi how was your weekend and what are your plans for the week." Walk into the class there, "You're late, sit down, you're late."	4	W	F	20
…I could get up, walk out of my classroom, walk around the building about five times; they wouldn't say nothing to me. And then you see about thirty people in the hallway, counselors, whoever, they didn't care, they just look at you…	4	H	M	16
Well, like [at *KKCS*] your teachers help you out and you know, [because] they talk to you and not just about school work and everything. And I feel like…at other schools, you turn to other things…you feel like the teachers don't care about you so why should you care, you know.	4	AA	M	19
…there are just so many students at public schools. There are, there's a lot. And teachers there, I mean they have this attitude like they don't have time for every individual student.	5	H	F	21
They don't care about my education, they didn't care if I was failing or not. They don't care. But at this school, I mean at this school, man they'll say: "Hey man, I heard	5	W	M	22

you've been slacking…" or "Something going on?"				
…I used to cut class all the time and the teachers really didn't care at all that I showed up or not. It didn't seem to matter to them whatsoever.	6	W	M	25
…they automatically fail the students that are in trouble, it's just they give up on them. And like, they're not going to listen anyways, so why do we have to even try more?	6	W	F	24
The counselors [at *KKCS*], they take you out of class to see how you are doing. Talk to you…they check up on you.	6	H	F	23

Appendix G: Reasons for Leaving – Relationships

Category – Relationships				
Statement	Group	Race	Sex	Person
I had to work a grave-yard shift, but I would miss some of my classes, but when I would come back it would be like total harassment from all my teachers…almost all of my teachers hated me…Everyone was like they hated my guts for no reason.	1	H	M	1
Yeah, like [teachers] can get involved with us, that would be a lot better too.	1	H	F	4
…and the big size, you just can't really get to know everybody, like your counselor or principal or anything like that.	2	W	M	9
It's like the counselors at [*KKCS*], you can just tell them what the deal is and they'll let you know what classes you need to go to.	2	H	M	7
…everybody knows everybody [at *KKCS*]	2	W	M	8
Even the principal knows you [at *KKCS*].	2	W	M	9
Anytime I used to talk to the principal [in a former school] it would be all bad stuff. That's the only time I ever saw the principal in high school. Even my counselor I didn't see.	2	W	M	10
If I were to walk into my other school, there's no way anybody would talk to me. I could be there the whole year and no one would, there are so many people.	2	W	M	8
It's like you couldn't fit in and they didn't care about whether you were a good person or whether you are going through a lot of shit…	3	H	F	12
I think the stereotype that they gave me and them worrying about me getting in trouble more than me learning was probably the main reason I left.	3	W	F	15
Like the teachers really rub it in, really kind of make it hard to go to school. Like they make you seem like you can't change.	3	W	F	14
You are supposed to be able to go to [teachers] when you're having a bad day…and you know if you need to cry, cry, if you need to scream, scream, if you need help, get help, whatever.	3	H	F	12
I didn't like [my previous school] because I didn't know anybody. And like the people would stereotype me.	3	H	F	11
That's why I like this school, there are not a lot of cliques…mainly everyone gets along with everybody, and	3	H	F	12

everybody talks with each other.			
Just [for teachers] to care, to have a personal relationship with their students. Personal relationship, definitely…Sometimes they won't even know your name.	3	H	F	11
[Teachers] are just itching to bust you.	4	W	F	20
…like I walk into class here and the teacher is like, "Hi, how was your weekend and what are your plans for the week." Walk into class [in previous school], "you're late, sit down, you're late."	4	W	F	20
…in a normal high school it's more like teacher to student even if there is a relationship, and most people don't have them. But here it's like friend to friend…and that's what I need. That's what helps me learn, cause my teacher sits down and says, "What can I do to help you graduate, what can I do to make you pass."	4	W	F	20
We'll here your teacher helps you out and, you know, they talk to you and not just about school work…	4	AA	M	19
...there's like this huge barrier between the students and the teachers over at those [traditional] schools. The teachers just look down on you, you're not on the same level, you know. At this school, it's all on first name basis… I can talk to them we're on the same level. I can talk to my teacher just like I'm talking to you right now… You know, it's like a big family, it really is. Everybody knows everybody at this school.	5	W	M	22
…some people can go to public schools and they can do great. But for me, I don't know man, it's like here I have a better relationship with the teacher. I mean my teacher, that's my friend.	5	W	M	22
There's a positive environment here. All the teachers are cool, they work with students.	5	H	F	21
Some [teachers] act like assholes toward certain students. It's just not right. It's not fair always.	6	H	F	27
…they'd put us all into one category.	6	AA	M	26
…not just to try to be a teacher, try to be the [student's] friend too.	6	H	F	23
I think the main thing about this school is the teachers. Meaning all of the teachers here, really care a lot, and they'll work with you and help you all the time.	6	W	M	25
You come to school [at *KKCS*] and they are, how are you today…and how's your weekend?	6	W	F	24
The counselors, they take you out of class to see how you are doing. They check up on you…they're just being	6	H	F	23

there.				
That's one of the other good things about this school that I guess I like. There's not those cliques and stuff. I mean, I've made all different types of friends here. There's nobody here I dislike.	6	W	M	25

Appendix H: Reasons for Leaving – School/Class Size

Category – School/Class Size				
Statement	Group	Race	Sex	Person
They have smaller classrooms [at *KKCS*] so that you have more individual attention from the teacher instead of like having like 30 people…	1	H	F	5
That's one of the reasons that I quit going, because it's just a huge high school...I mean, I [was tardy] every day and it just seemed like from tardies, it just seemed like every time I went they were shoving me in ISS.	2	W	M	9
My middle school probably had like 500 people, and the high school I went to had like probably 2,500 students. It was huge and there were so much drugs and everything.	2	W	M	9
[*KKCS*] is smaller…and it's a lot better.	2	W	M	8
…[I] like how big the classes are [at *KKCS*]…It's just hands-on work, the teachers are nice.	2	W	M	10
I could be there [in my other school] the whole year long and no one would even know. There are so many people.	2	W	M	8
…I like this atmosphere better, because it's smaller and there aren't as many classes.	3	W	F	14
There aren't as many people in the ratio of student to teacher	3	H	F	11
[I dislike] how big schools are… [My school] had like 3,500 students.	3	H	M	13
You get lost…you had to walk a mile to get to class.	3	W	F	14
You get lost in all the people, teachers, it's just like a soap opera. I would have bad days and I would just walk into people and say "Move, get out of my way!"	3	H	F	11
[The counselor has] got a line of people waiting…"I can get you in tomorrow…"	3	H	F	12
…I can kind of understand where [teachers] are coming from, because it's such a big environment. Like you have so many people to deal with and everybody isn't going to be willing to cooperate, so I can understand how they would be dicks about it.	3	W	F	15
Well, I mean, there are just so many students in public schools. There are, there's a lot. And teachers there have this attitude, like they don't have time for every individual student.	5	H	F	21
We got smaller classes [at *KKCS*], you know, its real easy man. You need help, that dude is right there to help you out. ….If you need help you get it in class because there's not so many people there. The teacher can go	5	W	M	22

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around from all over the place. It's pretty tight.				
They need to work on the classroom situation. There's too many students in the class [in public schools].	5	W	M	22
[I disliked] the classes, you have tons of students in classes…. And it seemed like every year there'd be just more and more and more. And you'd walk through hallways and you could barely even walk. And you bump into people.	6	H	F	23
There's like twenty-something kids in one class and one teacher…Teachers can't pay attention to all the kids unless there is like a volunteer or someone else to help out…the teachers are getting frustrated themselves trying to help out twenty-seven students and everybody gets frustrated.	6	W	F	24
[I recommend] a smaller school, less students.	6	H	F	27

Appendix I: Reasons for Leaving - Policies

Category – Policies				
Statement	Group	Race	Sex	Person
Certain colors you can wear. You can't wear your favorite colors.	1	H	F	4
And another thing that really did piss me off about school was…they had a thing called PRC. If you were late to class, you wouldn't go class, you would go to PRC. You would just sit there, do nothing, and be back by a day… But this school has a real laid back. They'll let you do your work. At [my previous school], they would just send me to PRC, stay there for the whole period and just do nothing and fall back even further behind.	1	H	M	1
One thing, I really didn't like the dress code, I think. You know, I wanted to wear whatever I want to wear. If I feel comfortable coming to school in this, I feel like I should be coming to school in it. I'm going to be, you know, kind of mad coming to school, you getting on me and I'm going to be thinking about that the whole day. You know, you trying to suspend me for wearing whatever I want to wear, and…I came here to work you know what I'm saying? If I want to work in this let me do what I do.	2	AA	M	6
Well, when I was in middle school, like in ISS your teachers would give you your work. Whenever I went to high school it was like they just throw you in there and you usually sat there for eight hours.	2	W	M	9
And you fall behind on your work…And they never gave us homework or anything like that.	2	W	M	10
Like, at a normal school, whenever you miss a lot and you don't have an excused absence or something, they suspend you. I don't understand what that's about…. They make you miss school for missing school that just doesn't seem right…. Two harsh of punishment, it's like they treat everything like you killed somebody.	2	W	M	8
They're more worried about what you're doing, like getting you in trouble and sending you to ISS then you being in class and learning. They more worried about, Oh she's like smoking a cigarette after this class period, we're going to catch her and send you to ISS for a week or something they don't care.	3	W	F	15
[ISS] is one of the reasons my mom made me leave, because their ISS was backed up, and I had to get on a waiting list to get into ISS. (Group laughter) My mom	3	H	F	11

was like…that doesn't make any sense, they're putting out more punishment than they can handle.				
Just like, the teachers, principals mainly, the tardy system that they have there. Like if you were tardy to class, then you had to go to this tardy table and get a note, to go to class, which the note is a fifteen [minute] detention…and if you didn't serve the detention then it would go to like thirty minutes, and then…to Saturday school, and if you don't do that then it's ISS, and if you don't do that then your just suspended. If I was tardy to class, I just wouldn't go...	3	H	M	13
Isn't that stupid because you're late, you're not getting… they're going to make you not get there even more…	3	W	F	14
It's like a downfall, like a landslide, your tardy and then all of a sudden…you're suspended! (stated with another female simultaneously)	3	H	F	11
Dress codes that are being enforced. Limited where to sit, you couldn't wear what you want to wear. You couldn't come down all one color or if they color shoe strings, if they were red or blue, you couldn't wear. You had to wear brown or something like that. It's all right, you know, if they say you can't wear blue or red, but I mean, what's wrong with yellow or orange, you know, just make one color brown or black, or something like that. I don't know there's just too many rules at the regular school…. They make people want to leave.	4	AA	M	19
Yeah, it's like these days now, there's so many rules, once you step on school grounds, it's just like your stepping in a jail… You can't do nothing now, you can't even go down the hallway now and say what's up to a friend, because they're going to be thinking, "Oh, well what's going on here, you need to stop talking, you need to get to class." I'm just trying hello to a friend and keep on, but yet you get into trouble. Like this happened a couple of times over here, but they're starting to be cool. The teachers here, like, get real involved with the students and are cool like that. So, no problems here, but like at other schools, you couldn't even say, "what's up"…	4	H	M	16
Well, mostly it's like the rules are pretty stupid as far as I'm concerned for regular schools. Like, can't have wallet chains, can't have spiked bracelets, you know, can't dye your hair, can't do the things that actually makes us, us. It's like, you know, why? There's no point in it.	4	W	M	18

And also, like a place where you have more freedom to do what you want. You'll be like, be more willing to go like, you feel more comfortable there. Like, I like to wear my pajamas. I'm actually not today this is like the first day in for ever. But, I wear my pajamas, almost every day, but I wasn't allowed; you can't wear flip-flops at this school I came from. Why? It's like, oh, toes you're distracting my learning.	4	W	F	20
Yeah, like at my school if your like, seriously, if your not in your seat when the bell rings, they do, they'd waste even more time, they'd send you down to the tardy table, and there would be a big, long line. You would wait there for about twenty minutes until you got your pass, and then you'd go back to class… You'd miss half your class. I mean I was like two- or three minutes late everyday cause my dad had like to get off work and take me to school, and I would be late. So, I would have to wait down there for like, I would miss half my class and I failed my first period class…	4	H	M	17
For one thing, man, they got, you know it's their dress code and stuff like that. They have this thing, I don't know how it is in [other] schools, but in [my old school district], they have this thing about facial hair. They don't like facial hair. And of course I have a go-tee and I've had this from seventh grade, eighth grade, I had this for two years in middle school. As soon as I got into high school, they're like you got to shave it, you got to take it off, you know. And, I mean, I constantly argued with these people about it. My parents argued with them. They said that they've been taken to court in the past, and they've won, that you can't beat it. And I was, you know, they wouldn't leave me alone, dude. I mean, it's like, I have a go-tee, I'm trying to get my education, and all they are concerned about is my go-tee. Yet these guys have facial hair themselves. Big old beards, everything, I mean, come on man.	5	W	M	22
Well, I just had my tongue pierced, and they wanted me to take it out.	5	H	F	21
The principal used to get on my case 'cause I always wore a certain color to school everyday… (Girl: Yeah. They say certain colors are gang colors, but it's just…) But I didn't come at 'em like that, I just always wore the color.	6	AA	M	26
You go to regular school wearing red or black you get into trouble because it's a gang color. And gangs are old,	6		F	

nobody ever cares about gangs or not. (Laughter)				

Appendix J: Reasons for Leaving - Professionalism

Category – Professionalism				
Statement	Group	Race	Sex	Person
Yeah, teachers think that they have authority over the class, and that we're supposed to respect them and stuff. They take that too far sometime, they take advantage of it.	1	H	F	4
Some teachers, they get out of hand, and they need to [better] express well their actions towards students.	1	H	F	5
Because some teachers they will have like a bad day yesterday and the as soon as they come back to school, their like, I'm not going to take it, and you didn't even, some of the classes didn't even do nothing. And then they would just flip out, because they had a class before that that was already messed up and then, from there, they have like one bad class and the rest of the day they're pissed off at everybody.	1	H	M	1
Most of them are coaches. They don't know jack squat about the subject, but then the only way they can put them in the budget is to take them as a social studies teacher or English teacher. And I'm talking about they're not that much smarter than us. And then the classes would be, they would, they made favorites and then the rest of the class was the outcasts.	1	H	M	2
I always got good grades, because I was in the softball at Austin High. I was a teacher's pet. I was always treated like, I don't know, I was always getting A's.	1	H	F	4
Like four or five classes in the day…is really not that fun and you have really long classes and it gets boring. They have boring classes. And they have you doing busy work just to get class over with, and stuff like that.	2	W	M	10
It was so easy to go out back and just smoke, and there would be no hall monitors harassing you. When the counselors started breaking down on that, that's when I actually started getting back on my feet at school.... Everybody is outside it's so easy you don't get caught. You go to class, teachers don't harass you.	2	H	M	7
Cause you could do your work without their help at all, like just figure it out and do it and pass and sleep in class.... [Teachers had] no faith in you, they don't believe in you or anything…they don't care.	3	W	F	14
They play favorites (Yeah). The people that sit there and listen every day and ask questions every day, they help them more and they're not the people that need help	3	H	F	11

more. We're the people that need help more… (Laughter)				
Like my Geometry teacher, he always calls us, like we tell him that his class is boring cause he just sit up there all day and talk, do nothing but just sit there and talk and write on the over head. And he's like, "You all are too stupid to figure it out that's why you think it's boring." He told me that I was going to grow up to be a janitor, you know?	3	H	M	13
And not everybody learns the same. I think that's another bad thing about it, like they have one way of teaching the curriculum.	3	W	F	15
At my school, this is one of the reasons my mom made me leave, because their ISS was backed up and I had to get on a waiting list to get into ISS. (Group laughter) My mom was like that doesn't make any sense, they're putting out more punishment than they can handle.	3	H	F	11
The principal told my dad that I smoke weed. He'd never seen me smoke weed, never caught me smoking weed, he told me that I smoke weed and cigarettes by the people that I hang out with.	3	H	M	13
But it's when the teachers, the people that you are suppose to be able to look up to and you're like, this is how I want to be aspiring to be like when I grown up? They are acting more immature than the students are. That says something about the school.	3	W	F	15
Yeah, I agree, cause the school I attended, the teachers they didn't give a damn, and if the student was talking or being loud, like a class clown. Every where you go, there is a class clown. And the teacher wouldn't even bother to worry about the class clown. If he would be loud, he would be loud, and the teachers would just pass out work. I agree with him.	4	H	M	16
Everybody learns different, but they teach it all the same, you know, the teachers… jump after everybody, and if you can't keep up, then you get left behind.	4	H	M	17
It's their job to teach people, not just stand up there and say, "Okay, just do it."	4	W	F	20
The first thing that I would tell them is for all of them to come sit in a classroom here for one day, and watch how the teachers here do their work...I would say, "Come watch a class, and watch how they teach in our school"....They listen and they sit down and say, "What can I do to help you learn this," and they hear both sides of the story, like we were saying earlier. They respect us.	4	W	F	20

...teachers there, I mean, they have this attitude, like they don't have time for every individual student. I mean, the people that can handle it and the people that can keep up with the teachers, then that's people that they are concerned with...and the ones who are falling behind, it's just, like too bad for them. And if your dressed a certain way, or if you look a certain way, then it's like they stereotype you.	5	H	F	21
Or you have those teachers that like you can tell they just hate their job. There's like no enthusiasm, no fire, man, it's just like, quit....How can a teacher just throw like a packet at you and you're suppose to learn from that? They should, like there are some teachers that I've had that are just great, but this past school that I went to, they were all dead. They just, it made me not want to go to school.	5	H	F	21
If the teacher is not even hyped up to get into the subject, why should you. I mean. Over here, man, the teachers are in it. We're in it.	5	W	M	22
Well [at *KKCS*] we try a lot about Quantum Learning. We, they try to focus a lot about Quantum learning. It's a new method of teaching kids...Like, there's a lot of coloring, a lot of visuals....Other schools, they won't even think about trying things like that. They just, you know, they refuse to like think of trying new methods.	5	W	M	22
Some act like assholes toward certain students. It's just not right. They're not fair to all the students.	6	H	F	27
It's just like some people can be playing around in the classroom and they tell certain people to stop and send them out, they won't send the other people, you know?	6	?	F	?
At our school, I guess there was a problem with like too little teachers cause like they had like coaches who didn't know what they were doing teaching history…(girls laughing)…and stuff like that. I mean, some of them would admit they didn't know what they were doing. And I mean it's hard to learn like that when it's somebody can't explain to you, the teacher can't explain to you what you are trying to learn.	6	W	M	25
Get real teachers to teach the classes. Teachers who know what they are doing, rather than just filling in spots.	6	AA	M	26

Appendix K: Reasons for Return - AmeriCorps

Category – AmeriCorps Program				
Statement	Group	Race	Sex	Person
AmeriCorps…It pays you for being in school. You get paid to go to school. You get a scholarship for college. Ah…I think I joined AmeriCorps my second session, like six weeks after I came here, and it's good because you work for four hours and, like, you can go to school in the morning and work in the afternoon, and it's, you know, a steady paycheck. You only have to work four hours a day, you get paid to go to school, and the big thing is the scholarship. Like, you work one year you get like a $4000.00 scholarship or something.	2	W	M	9
They're like if you join AmeriCorps, then you get into the school automatically. (Laughter) I was like all right, fine. So I joined the AmeriCorps, got in school and then dropped out of AmeriCorps…	3	H	M	13
It's a good program though, it really is, but it's only for certain people who are going to like really be there, who will come everyday on time and just get the whole day over with, you know? …Eight hour day and then bam go home, whatever.	3	--	F	--
Yeah, I joined the AmeriCorps program that was at this school… (Another Male Voice: Same here.) …And, I heard about this, cause I was here for three months, and then I heard about the program. And it sounded exciting, cause I was able to get paid to go to school, but yet I was also able to get a scholarship to get somewhere farther in life, like college, or [*Anywhere Community College*], like homeboy was saying...	4	H	M	16
I found out that thy will pay me to go to school and work, and I was like, Hey! Easy money.	4	W	M	18
The money. A lot of people are going, because they say you only have to go to school for four hours a day and get a check. But, you have to join the job.	4	--	M	--
I like the job better then I did school. I still work there, this is my second year.	4	H	M	17
They don't push you, they like, make you go to a certain amount, but they don't push you. Like they don't make you go for seven hours a day they make you go for four. (Male Voice: Yeah) They make you go for four, and like, when your, like, you're not like straining and just ready to go like…	4	W	F	20

You come here and they got the Americorps program, do you know about that? The Americorps program? …I did that for a year. I mean. I went to school from eight to twelve, and right after that I go on to work. And I work for the school, and I work under this umbrella.	5	W	M	33
We also get, um, scholarships for college.	5	H	F	21
And also the work program, like she was talking about, cause you get a scholarship.	6	W	M	25
I finished the program already…You can choose six months or a year. I did six months.	6	W	F	24

Appendix L: Reasons for Return - Boredom

Category – Bored				
Statement	Group	Race	Sex	Person
…I got so tired of sitting at home everyday and watching TV. Like I would be there, like it was great for the first month, it was great. And I was actually enrolled, cause you can't be legally like, if you withdraw from another school, you have to enroll in another one, or they consider you a drop out. So I came and enrolled in this school like immediately. So I was enrolled here, but I was still sitting on my ass all day like watching TV and stuff, and I just got so tired of that after a while. I got to get a job, I've got to go to school and get this shit over with.	3	W	F	14
Right, exactly…after the first month it was great, you know, cause it's kind of like a week off you know. So, I mean get away from all stuff you know. And then after a while, you're just there, your thinking, "What the hell am I doing"? You know? It's like I'm not doing anything.	3	H	F	12
I was like, I'm, I was seventeen, and I was like, man, I got to get back to school. I mean, what am I going to do? I was out of school just playing video games, for two years, man? Just doing whatever, you know. Ah, so, I was like, I have to get back to school, but I didn't know where to go.	5	W	M	22
I was sitting around doing nothing…[and just decided]…to go back to school	6	AA	M	26

Appendix M: Reasons for Return – Future Opportunities

Category – Enhance Work/Career/Financial Outlook				
Statement	Group	Race	Sex	Person
Get a better job	1	H	F	4
It's just, you know, I want to better myself. I want to have, you know, the better things in life too.	1	H	M	2
For my parents, my brother, and get a better job….	1	H	M	1
Basically, you know that you've got to get your diploma so you can get a better paying job for like, more than five bucks…Basically without a diploma you can't go nowhere.	2	H	M	7
The main reason I went back was just because, well, there were several reasons. The first one was a court order. The second one, I just wanted to get my diploma. I wanted to be something when I grow up and not a McDonald's employee. You know what I'm saying, I didn't want to be one of those guys. You know, I knew I couldn't do that, if I didn't have one. I know a GED is probably not going to get me that far either, so I just made a decision that if I want to be something, I've got to go back to school.	2	W	M	8
Just knowing that you can't be shit without a high school diploma or GED, just that.	3	W	F	14
Even if you have a high school diploma, and you are a tattoo artist, your still respected more by everybody.	3	--	F	--
He was like man you know I got my turn tables. I was like, you know you are really going to be pissed off if you go for a job interview, and this guy who has a diploma, gets it over you. And you know that you are better for the job.	3	H	M	13
I just want to get out of school, so I can go to like, [*Anywhere Community College*] or something and take some classes or something. Cause then you can't get a good job, unless you go to college or whatever.	4	H	M	17
My main influence is because I want to be a photographer. And I have to have a high school diploma to be a photographer. I want to make, you know, a lot of money. And have a good future for me and my daughter.	6	--	F	--
I came back to school because I realized I didn't want to be working a minimum wage job for the rest of my life. There's really not a lot you can do without a high school diploma.	6	W	M	25

Appendix N: Reasons for Return – Family/Peer

Category – Family/Peer				
Statement	Group	Race	Sex	Person
My mom said I wouldn't get my inheritance unless I keep up my school and got a diploma.	1	H	M	1
My little brother and little sisters…	1	AA	M	3
Yeah, you want to set an example for them. And also my boyfriend, he set an example for me. He's graduating and I didn't want to be like all behind. And he's all like, you know, in some ways he influenced me to go back to school. And my little brothers, you know, showing them it is possible.	1	H	F	5
My little brothers…I don't want them to be like me.	1	H	M	2
Same thing with the family…Yeah, my little brother, I want to set an example for him. I've dropped out so many times, and every time he's just like, Oh, I don't think your going to make it this time (laughter). Let him know that I can do it.	1	H	F	4
All my friends graduating. (Laughter)	2	W	M	10
I knew that if I didn't, I didn't want to be the first one in my family not to graduate. Cause I mean, my dad is the biggest fuck up in the world. He graduated. So if he can graduate, I can too…	3	H	F	12
…my family said I was following in my sister's foot steps, and she dropped out of high school, and like she got really bad. I didn't want to be like her, so like, I just like decided to go to school, plus I got tired of not going to school, I wanted to go back to school, but I didn't want to go back [to my last] school, so I found this school.	3	W	F	14
Well like, my brother came here…and he told me a lot about it, and I really liked it. So I just checked it out.	3	H	M	13
Mainly my parents, I don't want to disappoint them.	3	H	M	13
…two years ago, my mom passed away, I've got a little brother and sister, and I snapped. Like, if I was still was going to be doing what I used to do on the street, being mean like, going out there, and the first person that walked around the block, I had to beat them up. I had to change, cause my little brother and sister, they were blank. They didn't know what to do. We never had a father my mom was our dad. So, I had to snap. And, I have to be a role model for my little bother and sister. And this school brought out a lot in me.	4	H	M	16
A friend of mine actually went here, and she was telling	4	W	F	20

me how great it was and all this, and um, I called and I actually ended up coming here. And like, if it wasn't for this school, I wouldn't be graduating in two weeks, I wouldn't be here, because…like all of the schools around here are the same. The same bullshit rules and everything. This is like one of the only ones that is different. She just told me everything about it, and it sounded great and all the relationships with the teachers, and I just signed up and I came.				
I used to talk to a lot people… That's how I heard about [*KKCS*] too.	4	AA	M	19
…it was my family, and everything, cause my dad never got his high school diploma and my mom never graduated, my dad never graduated. The only person that did was my aunt. And I was like, no… you know, I can't let this happen. I've got to be, I'm first born son, I've actually got to go out and make something of this. I also look at my little sister, and she just, she is always telling me, oh, you're stupid, you don't go to school, you don't go to school, and it's like, I don't want her thinking that of me. I want, I want go.	4	W	M	18
…and, ah, you know, my dad, he's really up on education, man, and I was like, I, I let him down, man, I was out of school. I dropped out, so, come on man, I have a little brother. You know, ah, so I said, you know what…I got to get back to school.	5	W	M	22
My son. I just ah I want him to have things. I want him to be set for whatever he decides for his future. And I want to be a vet.	5	H	F	21
My main influence is because I want to be a photographer. And I have to have a high school diploma to be a photographer. I want to make, you know, a lot of money and have a good future for me and my daughter.	6	--	F	--

Appendix O: Reasons for Return – Personal Goal

Category – Personal Goal				
Statement	Group	Race	Sex	Person
Succeed.	1	AA	M	3
There's nobody in my family, my siblings, or my intermediate family, none of us have graduated from high school. And I want to be the first one.	1	H	F	4
…cause I really want, I really want to graduate and get my diploma, just for myself.	1	H	F	5
It's just, you know, I want to better myself. I want to have, you know, the better things in life, too.	1	H	M	2
I feel the same way, just getting your diploma and everybody around you graduating, and you know, just get it done, you know.	2	W	M	9
The main reason I went back was just because, well, there were several reasons. The first one was a court order. The second one, I just wanted to get my diploma…	2	W	M	8
My diploma, totally. That's the only reason I am here. If I didn't want my diploma I'd just leave right now.	2	W	M	9
I don't even think about dropping out here. I see this as my last chance, just due to my age. You screw up here its over.	2	H	M	7
Myself….Graduating for me.	3	H	F	12
Just knowing that you can't be shit without a high school diploma or GED, just that.	3	W	F	14
Graduating. I'm so close now… Like, it would be stupid of me, to like drop out now.	3	W	F	15
Just the final goal. The final goal and all of the support, that's just, that's it.	3	W	F	15
To feel like I have actually achieved something within our school teenage years.	3	H	M	13
High school diploma… Crossing the stage and getting that high school diploma.	4	--	M	--
Graduating.	4	W	F	20
Just trying to finish school, getting it over with.	4	H	M	17
Get a high school diploma and go to college.	6	--	F	--
Well, I wanted to graduate…That was a goal of mine. I guess, you know, you start school, and you go to middle school, then, you know, high school, and you want to get your diploma, you want to succeed and to have that. And do things that maybe your parents didn't do.	6	H	F	23

Appendix P: Intake Questionnaire

1. Sex:

   Male _____   Female _____

2. Ethnic/Racial Group:

   African American _____   Hispanic/Latino _____

   Asian American _____   White ____   Other _____

3. How old are you? _____

4. Which are you trying to earn right now?

   High School Diploma ____ GED ____

5. Prior to entering your current high school program, what grade level were you in when you decided to stop attending high school?

   9th _____   10th _____   11th _____   12th _____

6. How long were you out of school before entering this high school program?

   Number of Months:
   1-12 ___   13-24 ___   25-36 ___   37-48 ___   48+ ___

7. Have you "dropped out" of high school and then started back more than once?

   Yes _____   No _____

   If YES, how many times have you "dropped out" since you started the 9th grade? ____

8. What grade were you in the very first time you decided to leave high school? _____

   9th _____   10th _____   11th _____   12th _____

9. Did you ever "drop out" before starting high school (before entering the 9th grade)?

   Yes _____   No _____

   If YES, at what grade level did you leave? (Check all that apply)
   1st _____   3rd _____   5th _____   7th _____
   2nd _____   4th _____   6th _____   8th _____

10. How many total credits had you completed when you first decided to come to this school? __

Appendix Q: Focus Group Guide

Thank you for joining us this evening and taking the time to participate in this study. My name is Sean Haley and I will be moderating the group. Also I would like to introduce _____ who will be helping as an assisting me with the focus group. I will primarily be asking questions of you and I might occasionally remind you to speak up or repeat something along the way. _____ will be working hard to ensure that we are recording everything stated and he/she will be taking a lot of notes.

Before we get started I would like to remind you of why we are here and take a few moments for setting a few ground rules and making participant introductions.

Please take a moment to notice that our focus group will be taped. To capture as much information as possible it will be important that you speak as clearly as possible and try not to talk over one another. Sometimes this will be difficult because you will really want to react or respond to something that another participant has stated. That is a good thing, we just want to respect one another and make sure that everyone is heard so please be patient. When people talk at the same time the tape recording gets really jumbled and we will not be able to make sense out of the conversation later on when we go back and listen to it. I don't want to miss a word anyone has to say! Everyone will get a chance to speak. Also, please keep in mind that everything discussed during this focus group session will be kept confidential and we ask that you do not discuss anything asked or shared during the time we are together with anyone who is not a part of this particular focus group session.

So if there are not any questions at this time, I'd like to get the focus group started.
[Pause for questions]

Let's begin with you guys introducing yourself. This will give us a chance to check the tape recording system. How about we go around the room and you can simply state your name.
[Participant Introductions]

O.K. now I'd like to get you focused on the topic at hand.

We know that many students decide to drop out because they dislike school. During this focus group I would like to find out <u>what</u> you disliked about the school or schools that you decided to leave. I would like for you to share <u>specific</u> kinds of experiences that you had that made you dislike school. Feel free to talk about any aspect of your school experience during the course of the discussion—people, places, activities, classes, rules—<u>anything!</u>

Remember that the goal of this discussion is to focus on school-related issues.

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VITA

Sean A. Haley was born in Nashville, Tennessee on January 29, 1966, the son of Ronald A. Haley and Leona D. Haley. Completing high school at Strake Jesuit College Preparatory in Houston, Texas, in 1984, he then entered Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, where he received a Bachelor of Arts degree in Psychology in May 1988. He remained in Atlanta taking employment in an Adolescent Psychiatric Treatment Center and later serving in Atlanta Public Schools as a substitute teacher until arriving in Austin, Texas, in 1990 to work in the Office of Student Affairs at the Huston-Tillotson College. While at the college, he served as an Assistant Director of Residence Life prior to quickly advancing to the position of Student Activities Director, where he remained through 1995. In September 1994 he entered the Graduate School in the College of Education at the University of Texas at Austin. The degree of Master of Education was awarded to him from the university in May 1999. During the following years he was employed in a number of school leadership capacities while pursuing the degree of Doctor of Philosophy at the University of Texas at Austin. He served in the capacities of Academic Coordinator and then Acting Director of the *High School Enrichment Program* at Huston-Tillotson College, which included a "dropout recovery" alternative high school (in conjunction with the Austin Independent School District) and a post-secondary preparation program (*Upward Bound*) for potential first-generation, college-bound students. In July 2001 he became the Assistant Principal ("Middle/High School Principal") of *NYOS Charter School* in Austin, Texas, and was charged with developing the secondary school program (grades 6-12). In July 2003 he ascended to the position of Principal (grades PK – 12). Upon graduating the first two senior classes of the school, he exited the principalship in order to complete this dissertation. At the time of the submission of this dissertation, he was employed by the Region XIII Education Service Center in Austin, Texas, as the Coordinator for the Texas High School Project.

Permanent Address: 3103 East 13th Street, Austin, Texas 78702

This dissertation was typed by the author.