ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION: ADMINISTRATOR PERCEPTIONS OF ALTERNATIVE EDUCATION AND AT-RISK YOUTH

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With love and appreciation, this dissertation is dedicated to

my husband, Mark, and my children, Madeline and Samuel.

Mark, completing this journey with you was truly an incredible experience.
You pushed me to challenge myself and supported me every step of the way.

Madeline and Samuel, you are simply the best. You were always ready
to share a hug or an encouraging word when this process got tough.
I appreciate your love and support and want you both to know
just how very much I love you.

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ABSTRACT

Successful attainment of a high school diploma is essential in today's society. For some students, however, internal and external pressures present significant barriers to school completion. Disengagement from school by these at-risk students is not only detrimental to the individual students, but to the school community and society as a whole. For some students, Alternative Education placements may be a way to reengage them and aid them in school completion.

This case study examined the Park Run School District, a pseudonym for the school district, to discover the perceptions of Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY) placements by school officials responsible for making the decision to place students as well as other key educators who work directly with at-risk youth. Interviews were used to seek to determine the needs of at-risk students, why administrators choose to refer (or not to refer) students to placement, and if current programming was sufficient.

The findings were categorized into three themes, people, placement, and practice. The first theme, people, looked at the concept of risk, the reasons students drop out of school, and they role key individuals play in the lives of at-risk youth. The second theme, placement, looked at the non-traditional nature of alternative education settings, the referral process itself, and the factors administrators consider prior to student outplacement. Finally, the third theme, practice, focused on the nexus of the first two, looking at the most common reasons for referral, the perceived inhibitors to student placement, and the need for additional settings to meet student need.

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INTRODUCTION, SIGNIFICANCE AND RATIONALE

Statement of the Problem

Attainment of a high school diploma is essential in today's society. Studies show that a high school dropout will earn approximately $300,000 less than a graduate, and nearly one million less than a peer with a post-secondary degree over their working lives (C. A. Lehr, Clapper, & Thurlow, 2005). Additionally, high school dropouts are also linked to increased health risks, welfare participation, habitual unemployment, crime involvement and time in prison (Harlow, 2003; Sanchez & Wertheimer, 2011; The Alliance, 2013).

Annually, over one million students drop out of high school and cost the nation between "$320 and $350 billion dollars in lost wages, taxable income, health, welfare, and incarceration costs" (Sanchez & Wertheimer, 2011). The U.S. Bureau of Justice indicates that 56 percent of federal inmates, 67 percent of state prison inmates, and 69 percent of local inmates do not have a high school diploma (Glaze & Herberman, 2013). Additionally, the average annual cost to house one inmate is $28,323. Comparatively, the average annual cost to educate a child in the United States is less than half of this cost, $12,643 (The Alliance, 2013). According to the Alliance for Excellent Education (2013), working to increase the male graduation rate by just 5 percentage points could save the nation $18.5 billion dollars in crime-related costs each year.

Unfortunately, school completion is a difficult task for many of today's youth. Internal and external pressures make diploma attainment nearly impossible for some students as they continue to become disengaged from the educational process. One potential solution is increased alternative education settings for students who are disengaged. Smaller settings, intensive focus, and counseling components may help students to overcome obstacles and complete high school. However, for some districts, the rising costs of placements outside of the traditional setting, lack of control over curricular decisions, and increased accountability on state assessments, make the decision to place students alternatively more difficult ("Sounding the Alarm," 2012; Timberlake-Newell, 2012).

Purpose of the study

As national and state guidelines for academic proficiency and graduation rates continue to rise, school districts actively seek ways to educate all students. Placement in alternative settings can be costly, however, and many districts shy away from referring students to these placements. Additionally, students housed within most alternative education programs are not excused from state testing mandates, requiring districts to take a close look at the academic components of alternative settings. This strict focus on cost and academic achievement (as measured by high-stakes exams) by district officials, while understandable and often necessary, can easily override the behavioral and therapeutic needs of many students who could benefit from being placed in alternative settings.

The purpose of this study is to discover the perceptions of alternative programs, specifically those labeled as Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY) placements, by school officials charged with making the decision to place students outside of the traditional school setting. The study gathered data on district decisions surrounding placement of students in alternative settings, the most common reasons for referral to AEDY placement, availability of appropriate programs locally, and educator perceptions of alternative education and at-risk students. Although this qualitative case study may not allow for generalizations across the Commonwealth found in a quantitative study, data collected in this study will help the local district involved in the case study to determine what types of programs are effective for at-risk youth, which are not, why administrators choose to refer students to placement, or why they choose not to, and where there are voids in current programming choices. It may also provide guidance to other districts in the Commonwealth and beyond to better understand their own decisions regarding at-risk youth and alternative placements.

While research can be found surrounding funding for AEDY programs, graduation rates, and general program characteristics (Foley & Pang, 2006; Hosley, 2003; Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005; Tobin & Sprague, 1999), little research has been done on the alternative program perceptions of district administrators. This study aimed to determine whether or not the current AEDY programming choices available in Park Run School District (PRSD), a pseudonym for the school district, matches the needs of district administrators, and ultimately, the students they serve.

Significance of the Study

With college and career readiness at the forefront of the current administration's educational spotlight, it is important to ensure that all students have an opportunity for success. Alternative schools may provide at-risk students with the supports they need to reach graduation and leave the K-12 educational system with the skills necessary to be successful. A deeper look, however, at the alternative education system as a whole is necessary to determine which students might benefit from placement and whether or not placement alone is enough to reengage students.

This study aimed to look at the role school employees' actions play in the lives of at-risk youth. The decisions made by these individuals can shape the future of these students both positively and negatively. Administrator program perceptions can ensure a student who could benefit from an alternative setting is placed early and accurately; or they could be the very things that help a student make the final decision to leave school. Additionally, varying perceptions among different educators within the same system could further confuse the process. Through an exploration of key educator's perceptions surrounding at-risk youth as well as alternative programs, it may be possible to isolate the factors that weigh heaviest on the decision to place a student alternatively as well as on the likelihood of future success for the youth themselves.

Research Questions

For the purposes of this study, a perception is defined as a way of interpreting or understanding something and is informed by beliefs, values, and previous experiences as

shown in Figure 1. In an effort to determine the role, if any, educator perceptions play in student placement, this research addressed the following question and sub-questions.

How do educators perceive Alternative Education and At-risk Youth?

a. To what extent do educators understand AEDY? (Intent and compliance)
b. What other factors (i.e. budget, location) play a role in student placement?

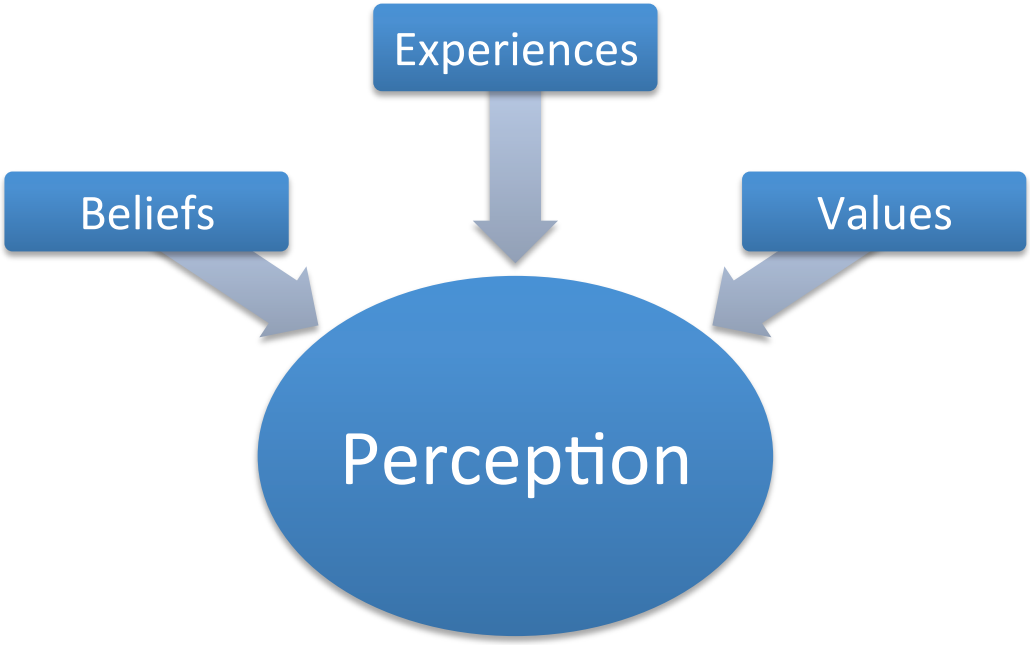

Figure 1: Framework to define perceptions

Limitations of the Study

Although this study has the potential to provide insight into the perceptions of educators with regard to both at-risk youth and alternative placements, it is limited in its ability to be generalized beyond the local context.

With interviews were the focal point of the data collection for this study, it was necessary to make some revisions to the interview protocol "on the spot" as follow up questions and individualized conversation occurred. An additional limitation of this study is that it only focused on students once they reach secondary schools, and did ot necessarily address the feelings of administrators and educators in elementary and middle school buildings or the experiences of at-risk youth in elementary and middle school settings.

Positionality

As with all qualitative research, there is a potential for observer bias. The study acknowledges my former and current position within the organization being studied. As a former building level administrator, I had direct responsibilities regarding placement of students in AEDY programs. However in my current central office role, I am no longer part of the decision making process and do not have any oversight over these programs. During the year prior to data collection the organization had seen a turnover of several positions planned to be interviewed in this study, none of which have an understanding of the researcher's former role.

Former roles as a teacher and administrator, as well as experiences with both at-risk youth and alternative education settings, led to my desire to study this topic. After having seen the impact both teachers and administrators can have in the lives of students, this study aimed to further explore the relationship of educator perceptions and student success in school as measured by school completion.

Definition of Terms

1. *Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY) Program* - A program approved by the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) that is designed to support a school's efforts to provide a temporary placement for disruptive students in grades 6 through 12. Students enrolled in an AEDY program will continue to make academic progress and work to remedy disruptive behavior through counseling and other behavioral interventions. Unless the seriousness of a student's behavior warrants immediate placement, local programs shall refer and admit students only when other documented and established methods of discipline have failed, and shall limit enrollment to disruptive students as defined by the Pennsylvania School Code (24 P.S. 19-1901-C (5)) (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013, p. 2).
2. *Alternative Education Programs* – "Individualized opportunities designed to meet the educational needs for youth identified as at-risk for school failure" (Foley & Pang, 2006, p. 11).
3. *At-risk* – For the purposes of this study, the term at-risk shall mean students who are not experiencing success in school due to a combination of internal and external factors and who require intervention to reach graduation.
4. *Dropout* - "A student who, for any reason other than death, leaves school before graduation without transferring to another school/institution" (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012a). In Pennsylvania, a student must be 16 (with parental consent and full-time employment) or 17 without to drop out of school.

5. *Disruptive student* – "A student, in grades 6 through 12, who poses a clear threat to the safety and welfare of other students or the school staff, who creates an unsafe school environment, whose behavior materially interferes with the learning of other students or disrupts the overall educational process" (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013, p. 2)
6. *Perception* – For the purposes of this study, perception shall mean a way of interpreting or understanding something based on beliefs, values, and previous experiences.
7. *Resilient student* – A student "who succeed[s] in school despite the presence of adverse conditions" (Waxman, Gray, & Padron, 2003, p. 1)

CHAPTER 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The literature review for this study focuses on the available research surrounding alternative education programs and at-risk youth. The review begins with an overview of the issues facing public education in Pennsylvania today, as well as the history of alternative education, in order to build a context for the overall discussion. Since this study focuses on Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY) programs in Pennsylvania, available research was included to frame the current programming rules and regulations.

In order to understand how alternative education may help some students, it was necessary to research not only the different types of alternative education schools and available interventions, but also to look at the characteristics of the students who have been labeled as at-risk to determine why they disengage from school and what impact this has on their lives.

Issues Facing Public Education in Pennsylvania

Article III of the Pennsylvania Constitution states that, "The General Assembly shall provide for the maintenance and support of a thorough and efficient system of public education to serve the needs of the Commonwealth" (PA Const. art. III, § 14).

Unfortunately, over the last few decades, Pennsylvania has struggled with its school funding formula, making it difficult for local districts to provide equitable educational experiences to students across the commonwealth (Klehr, Presson, Schaeffer, & Zelno, 2013; "Pennsylvania's Historic School Funding Problem | Pennsylvania School Funding Campaign," 2014; Woodall, 2013). In addition, Pennsylvania's focus on local control means that 500 school districts, which can differ greatly in size, are each working independently to fund their schools.

Public schools in Pennsylvania operate with funds from federal, state, and local government. In 2010, nearly 36 percent of public education costs were covered by the state budget. In comparison, the national average for state funding was nearly 47 percent, with only 6 states funding less than Pennsylvania (Kinitsch, Zelno, & Risch, 2011; Klehr et al., 2013). With local governments left to make up the remaining 55 percent of the budget after federal (approximately 8%) and state funding, the burden shifts to local taxpayers, creating inequities among districts in low-income areas. The Pennsylvania Department of Education shows this disparity in its report of per student spending in which amounts range from $7,000 to $37,000 ("School Spending," 2013). In 2011, state funding for Pennsylvania's classrooms was cut by $859 million dollars, affecting not only basic education subsidies but also other programs such as full-day kindergarten, and tutoring programs. While the 2013-2014 budget added $100 million back into the basic education subsidy, school districts still face cuts of over $400 per student from funding levels prior to the 2011-12 cuts ("Pa. House Budget Locks in Most of the School Funding Cuts," 2013).

Public schools across the nation continue to be under intense scrutiny from stakeholders expecting a quality education for students even as funding continues to dwindle. Over the last decade, laws such as No Child Left Behind aimed to ensure that all students were taught by highly qualified teachers in order to ensure they could achieve proficiency in Reading and Math as measured through state-mandated testing. These tests were designed to hold school districts accountable to students, parents, and the community by measuring yearly progress (AYP) towards these academic milestones ("No Child Left Behind Act of 2001," 2002a). However, in 2011-2012, only 48% of Pennsylvania public schools were listed as having met the AYP goals (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012b). In August 2013, Pennsylvania received a waiver from the U.S. Department of Education, which allowed for the elimination of AYP, replacing it with the School Performance Profile (SPP). The SPP reports student scores on standardized testing as well as graduation and attendance rates and growth of all students as well as historically low performing students. School districts continue to face pressure to not only increase performance on state tests but to also close the achievement gap of underperforming students.

As noted above, through the SPP metrics, there is an additional focus on school attendance and graduation rates. Meanwhile, for some students, the academic and social pressures in their lives make completing high school in a traditional setting nearly impossible. Pennsylvania, like many other states, has compulsory school attendance laws that require students to attend school up to the age of seventeen or graduation, whichever comes first (24 P.S. § 19-1902-C).

While reports continue to indicate that dropouts are at near all time lows (Associated Press, 2013; Zimmerman, 2013), graduation rates in Pennsylvania have stayed steadily around 84%. Although well above the national average of 75%, Pennsylvania is not making adequate progress in graduating Black and Latino students, making it one of 23 states not on track to reach a graduation rate of 90% by 2020 ("Building A Grad Nation," 2013). In order to help students who are at-risk for dropping out, schools must find ways to ensure that these students can overcome the obstacles they face in order to graduate from high school.

For some students, and school districts, access to alternative education could be a solution. In a survey of 1,000 students who made the decision to leave school early, many students selected reasons for leaving that directly related to the school environment, including: not getting along with teachers; not getting along with peers; not feeling safe at school; a general feeling of not belonging; not being able to keep up with school work; and being suspended too often (Lehr et al., 2005). While not a guarantee of eventual graduation, placement in an alternative program could alleviate some of these facets for some students.

Historical Background of Alternative Education

It is helpful to look at alternative schools through a historical lens in order to understand their existence. Alternatives to traditional education have existed since the birth of common schools in the 1800s. As Horace Mann's common schools moved from Massachusetts to other states in the 1830's and 1840's, some groups began to show

disdain with the repetitive teachings and the use of the King James Bible, leading to the famous "Bible Wars" (Finkelman, 2013, p. 1293). More Americans instead decided to rely on home education (as some were already doing) and apprenticeship, as well as religious focused schools, such as those founded by the Catholics and Quakers. In 1884, the Catholic Parochial School System was established, which called for the building of parish run schools which congregants were expected to send their children to. The focus of these schools became religion and discipline, and they were viewed as an alternative to the protestant-led public schools (Kaestle & Foner, 1983).

In the late 1800s and early 1920s, the idea of vocational education as an alternative gained momentum as curriculum was designed to meet the needs of students rather than focusing on college entrance requirements (Emery, 2000). Founded by John D. Rockefeller in 1902, the General Education Board (GEB) focused on providing real world skills to students, preparing them for the workforce. Together with the Teachers College at Columbia University, the GEB established the Lincoln Alternative School in 1916 and offered curriculum that included the Use of Geometry in Architecture, Household Measurements, and biology lessons in local parks and zoos (Emery, 2000; Semel, 1999). However, once the curriculum grew and textbooks were generated, many felt it was no longer a true alternative. It ceased to exist after merging with the Horace Mann School in 1939.

By the 1950's nearly 90% of all children aged five to nineteen were enrolled in public schools (Tyack, 1995). However, controversy over the school system's ability to work with students who did not respond to the academic curriculum or the vocational opportunities continued. Estimated by the U.S. Office of Education to be nearly 60

percent of high school students, many worried that these "low ability" students would contribute to "juvenile delinquency" (Emery, 2000; Herbst, 1996).

This presented a significant shift in defining alternative education. It seems as though this was the beginning of the use of "alternative" to mean "at-risk" or "delinquent", rather than to simply mean a different option. Although much of the modern alternative school movement, generally considered to be from the 1960s to the present (Lange & Sletten, 2002), focused on the frustration with the inequities of the current public schools, the theme of at-risk alternatives continued.

The Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) of 1965 aimed to provide funding and a focus on equity. Later reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind act, ESEA allocated federal funding for primary and secondary school education and the development of a national curriculum ("Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965," 1965). Public education in the late 1960s and 1970s brought rise to activism designed to push American democracy forward, but was marred by student demonstrations and teacher strikes and the rise of "free schools" as well as magnet schools. "Free Schools" were developed to be small educational programs free from state control. Free schools differed from other alternative programs most notably because the very purpose of them was to ensure that children were educated according to beliefs and values in direct opposition of those of the dominant culture (Miller, 2002).

President Reagan's report titled A Nation at Risk ("A Nation At Risk," 1983), shook the nation and challenged America's educational systems by asserting that public schools were failing (Graham, 2013). The nation's focus became on producing "better disciplined citizens and workers for a competitive global economy" (Miller, 2011) and on

"more rigorous and measurable standards for learning" (Graham, 2013). The study outlined the fear that the American educational system was on a downward trajectory but failed to specify when this decline began (Wong, Guthrie, & Harris, 2004, p. 17). Conversations about "failing public schools" continue thirty years later at the local, state, and national level. Inner city schools are often at the forefront of these discussions because of the availability of schools of choice such as charters. For many suburban areas, the conversation of failing schools is often clarified by a general feeling that while schools in general are bad, their own schools are fine ("The Battle Over School Choice," 2000).

Alternative programs of the 1980s and early 1990s circled back to the concern over students who were unengaged in the learning process. They focused primarily on core curricular study (English, Math, Science, and Social Studies) as well as vocational programming and non-traditional opportunities to increase student achievement, engagement and retention.

Alternative schools and interventions

Alternative education is a broad term that continues to be used in a variety of ways. As described above, Alternative Education in the 1800s and 1900s focused more on religion and politics than on student needs. From the late 1980s through today, the term Alternative Education typically has had a negative connotation, focusing only on programs designed for students labeled as juvenile delinquents or behavioral problems. In reality, alternative schooling is much more diverse, and can also include charter

schools, religious schools, cyber schools, STEM academies and the like. Alternative education is also an option for students with physical and learning disabilities, allowing schools to provide a free and appropriate education in the least restrictive environment under federal guidelines (US Department of Education, 2010).

Alternative schools often offer an opportunity to pinpoint the root cause of the observable behaviors of students who have not responded to traditional consequences. Most public schools are limited in the scope of consequences given to students who habitually misbehave, relying on out of school suspensions, which result in less class time for students and are often a preference to school for many students. A recent publication by the National School Board Association states that during the 2009-2010 school year, an estimated 3 million students were suspended out of school ("Addressing the out-of-school suspension crisis: A policy guide for school board members," 2013). Additionally, the report shares evidence that suspensions are a predictor of a student's drop out risk. A survey of nearly 1,000 students who left school before graduation included too many suspensions as one of the main factors for drop out (C. A. Lehr et al., 2005, p. 58).

Based on the work of Raywid (1994) alternative education exists within three categories:

> Type I: Schools of choice that focus on specific curricular areas, instructional strategies, or both. These schools are often touted as being innovative and are frequently used as alternatives to traditional public schools in urban areas. These schools are typically popular and are considered schools of choice, many of which have extensive waiting lists. Examples may include "charter" or "magnet" schools.

Type II: "Last-chance" programs where students are sent prior to, or as a result of, being expelled from the traditional setting. While academic work is one component of these programs, the focus is typically on behavior modification. These programs do not involve choice on the part of the student or families. Modifications to the curriculum are often to provide a focus on only the basic skills and requirements for graduation and are not specific to the individual student's needs or interests.

Type III: Programs with a remedial focus for academic and/or social/emotional needs of the students they serve. The goal of these programs is typically to remediate/rehabilitate the student, and then return them to the traditional setting for school completion. The assumption with most Type III schools (as well as some Type II schools) is that the problems lie within the individual student and can be "fixed", allowing the student to be successful once again in the traditional setting. Successful Type III alternative programs ensure this supportive environment by developing a sense of community, ensuring a low student-teacher ratio, providing individualized and differentiated instruction at the students level, and allowing for teachers and students to form positive, appropriate, relationships characterized by trust and respect (Lange & Sletten, 2002; Raywid, 1994).

AEDY in Pennsylvania

In Pennsylvania, type II and III schools are identified as Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY) placements. AEDY program placements can vary greatly, depending on the reasons for referral. For example, Juvenile Probation might place a violent student with a history of weapons offenses in a secure, locked-down facility often referred to as a juvenile detention center (Type II Program). While in placement, these students receive an education under the AEDY umbrella and can often work towards or earn a General Education Diploma (GED) before being released. While students may receive some rehabilitation services in these placements, the overall focus is more on the punishment than on ensuring the needs and goals of the student are being met.

On the other hand, a habitually truant student might not need that same level of security and could be placed in a less restrictive AEDY program that focuses instead on

rehabilitation and remediation (Type III). This type of student could benefit from a supportive environment where trusted adults foster an environment of belonging and security, removing barriers to the student's academic success with the goal of returning the student to his/her home school.

The PDE website highlights information regarding school code and the appropriate reasons for referral. A deeper look at the Basic Education Circular (BEC) lists the seven reasons students can be referred to an AEDY Program. They are:

(1) Disregard for school authority, including persistent violation of school policy and rules
(2) Display or use of controlled substances on school property or during school activities
(3) Violent or threatening behavior on school property or during school-affiliate activities
(4) Possession of a weapon on school property, as defined under 18 Pa. C.S. §912
(5) Commission of a criminal act on school property or during school-affiliated activities
(6) Misconduct that would merit suspension or expulsion under school policy
(7) Habitual truancy.

Until the Safe Schools Initiative of 1995, AEDY programs were not regulated by the Commonwealth. The criteria for referral were developed, in part, to regulate institutions providing alternative education to youth. Based on the Safe Schools legislation as well as adaptations to the school code over the past 15 years, AEDY programs in Pennsylvania must apply for approval from the Commonwealth before offering educational services to students.

In Pennsylvania, all AEDY programs must provide students with the academic standards outlined in PA Code Chapter 4 (22 Pa. Code § 4.24) but they must also provide 2.5 hours per week of individual and/or group counseling and behavioral support to all

students. This requirement seeks to provide a safe and alternative environment to students who are struggling socially and/or academically by creating a behavior and academic success plan for each student with clear, measurable goals. Progress towards these goals is monitored and documented with the goal of returning 20% of all students to the regular school environment (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2013).

In 1997, the Pennsylvania General Assembly passed Act 30, which created a state-level grant program allowing for supplemental funding to operate AEDY programs. In 1999, the law was further amended to allow public schools to contract with private alternative education providers (Brownstein, 2013). Over the last 18 years, Pennsylvania has grown its AEDY programs significantly, but has also seen periods of decline in both funding and student enrollment. In 2003, 632 Pennsylvania AEDY programs served over 40,000 students. While the number of AEDY settings in 2011-2012 rose to 705, these programs only served 14,000 students (Brownstein, 2013, p. 5). Until 2010, these programs received millions of dollars in state aid and grant funding. Over the last five years, this funding has been eliminated, drastically changing the way in which these programs function ("Improving 'Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth' In Pennsylvania," 2010, p. 12).

While specific information regarding funding and enrollment is no longer published on the Department of Education website, some historical data is available as outlined in Table 1 below. The final report for public schools was published in 2010 and included information from the 1999-2000 school year through the 2006-2007 school year (PA Department of Education, 2010). Additional information regarding the 2011-2012 school year was published by the Education Law Center in their report regarding AEDY

programs (Brownstein, 2013). Multiple attempts to secure additional information for the periods of 1997-1999, 2007-2011, and 2012-2013 were unsuccessful. During the duration of this research, no response was received from PDE or the AEDY office. A response was received from the Education Law center, however it only confirmed that the information sought was not publicly available.

Table 1: Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth Historical Information

	1999/2000	2000/2001	2001/2002	2002/2003	2003/2004	2004/2005	2005/2006	2006/2007	2011/2012
Amount Awarded in dollars	9,970,908	24,746,784	25,896,000	26,256,000	20,652,666	20,652,666	19,848,877	20,100,000	NA
Funding per student in dollars	920.16	1,990.63	1,840.00	1,665.00	1,024.00	1,076.00	1,001.00	1,026.00	NA
# of programs	306	379	469	546	632	641	603	605	705
# students served	16,681	22,225	23,522	38,901	40,741	27,534	29,601	31,080	14,470

Multiple reports have been published surrounding the placement of students in alternative settings. In 2009, the Education Law Center testified before the state legislature to report their findings of an overrepresentation of students with disabilities in AEDY programs. In their 2013 formal complaint, the Education Law Center still found a disproportionate number of students with disabilities, as well as of African American students. The data from the report suggests that while only 15% of all Pennsylvania public school students are identified as students with disabilities, recent AEDY enrollment data shows that 43.66 % of all AEDY students are identified as having a disability (Brownstein, 2013, p. 8). Additionally, 82 school districts within the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania were found to have more than 50% of their total AEDY placements for students with disabilities ("Feds to Investigate Discrimination in PA's Alternative Ed Programs | Education Law Center," 2014).

Similarly, the statewide percentage of African American students in all PA public schools remains just under 16%, yet these students make up 35.3% of all AEDY students (Brownstein, 2013, p. 13). Forty five Pennsylvania school districts had a disparity of twenty percentage points or more between the percent of African Americans in district and those placed alternatively ("Feds to Investigate Discrimination in PA's Alternative Ed Programs | Education Law Center," 2014)

Significant revisions have been made to the AEDY referral process over the last few years in an attempt to ensure students were correctly identified before being moved to an alternative placement. Additionally, the U.S. Department of Justice has responded to the Education Law Center's August 2013 complaint, opening an investigation into the discriminatory placement of students in AEDY programs ("Feds to Investigate

Discrimination in PA's Alternative Ed Programs | Education Law Center," 2014). This showcases the need for further study in the area of student placement in Alternative settings.

Characteristics of at-risk youth

Students who are educated in alternative settings are often labeled as at-risk (i.e. by state and federal policymakers). The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (*No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, 2002b) categorized at-risk students as "students who, for whatever reason, are at risk of not achieving the goals of education--of not meeting local and state standards for high school graduation, of not acquiring the knowledge, skills, and dispositions to become productive members of the American society" (p. 67). Although this law has changed significantly, the definition remains the standard in education. In order to identify such risk factors, studies typically focus on comparisons of students who do and do not drop out of school (Lee & Burkham, 2000). Generally, students in alternative settings share characteristics similar to those defined as at-risk behaviors, including: poor academic skills; insufficient social, emotional and behavioral skills; impulsivity; limited family support; connection with the justice system; and drug and alcohol problems (Guerin & Denti, 1999; Kochhar-Bryant & Lacey, 2005). Lee and Burkham (2000, p. 2) further refine these risk factors into three categories:

1. Social background – includes race, gender, family structure and socioeconomic status

2. Academic background – includes ability, standardized test scores, and grade retention
3. Academically related behaviors – includes engagement with school, truancy, and suspensions/discipline

The concepts of social risk and academic risk, as described by (Lee & Burkam, 2003) can help to further define the potential for students to leave school before completion. Social risk involves demographic variables associated with school difficulties. These may include, but are not limited to: gender, race, age, native language, family structure, socioeconomic status, and parents level of education (Alexander, Entwisle, & Horsey, 1997). Data suggest that students of minority groups, low-income families, and families where both parents did not complete high school are at a greater risk of dropping out (Lee & Burkam, 2003; Natriello, McDill, & Pallas, 1990).

Alternatively, academic risk relates to students' school performance and behaviors (V. E. Lee & Burkam, 2003). Variables for academic risk may include: frequent absenteeism or truancy; grade retention; deficiencies in academic achievement; low grades; and frequent disciplinary action, including suspensions and expulsions.

Consistently, the focus of defining characteristics of at-risk youth is closely tied to personal characteristics of the students and rarely focuses on the schools themselves (Lee & Burkham, 2000). Choosing to focus only on student characteristics may create a gap in our understanding of why students drop out of school as it seems to be a poor decision rather than an indication of struggle within a particular setting. A focus on the school setting itself could aid in determining whether or not an at-risk student could benefit from alternative education settings.

Disengagement from school

As previously mentioned, schools in Pennsylvania must report graduation and attendance rates to the PDE as a part of the School Performance Profile. As districts continue to focus on student retention at the high school level across the Commonwealth, research suggests that the process of disengagement starts as early as middle school, with retrospective studies identifying dropouts even earlier (Lehr, Johnson, Bremer, Cosio, & Thompson, 2004). Most believe that a student's decision to leave school is influenced by years of unsuccessful school experiences, overwhelming outside pressures, lack of school connections, and a general dislike for school and that many of these students exhibit at-risk behaviors for some time before they actually exit school. For some students, coming to school each day is a reminder of their lack of academic success and is enough to cause them to decide not to return.

Additionally, a focus on the reasons why students disengage from the educational process is important. "Most youngsters, including so-called at-risk youths, begin school enthusiastic, optimistic, and eager to learn" (Alexander et al., 1997, p. 87). However, the study conducted by Alexander et al.maintains that the process of disengaging from the school setting may begin as early as 1st grade. Although most students make the final decision to leave school between 10th and 12th grade, disengagement is a cumulative process and often encompasses several of the social and academic risk factors listed above (Lehr et al., 2005).

In addition, another concern for student equity and advancement surrounds the use of tracking in public schools. In her report entitled The Policy and Practice of

Curriculum Inequality (Oakes, 1986), Jeannie Oakes discusses the inability to foster equality and excellence in systems in which tracking of students is prevalent. She states, "the net effect of tracking is to exaggerate the initial differences among students rather than to provide the means to better accommodate them" (p.15). With regard to a students potential disengagement from school, Oakes further states that "students who are not in the top tracks – a group that includes about 60% of senior high school students – suffer clear and consistent disadvantages from tracking… tracking can reduce self-esteem, lower aspirations, and foster negative attitudes towards school. Some studies have also concluded that tracking leads low-track students to misbehave and eventually drop out altogether" (Oakes, 1986). An understanding of the potential role public schools and curricular decisions play in the disengagement of youth is critical.

Impact on student success

It is possible that there is a direct link between opportunities for alternative education and at-risk youth dropping out. There is little research in this area, but according to the Education Law Center, "these [AEDY] programs have the potential to help create successful futures for students who are having difficulty and exhibiting problems in school ("Improving 'Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth' In Pennsylvania," 2010, p. 41). Success of students can be viewed in many ways, including academic success (school completion, achievement, etc.) and social success (rehabilitation of behaviors, social skills training, etc.).

In 2010, the Education Law Center presented a report titled "Improving Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth in Pennsylvania." The study focused on important factors related to the ways in which AEDY programs currently function, and sought to identify the ways in which programming must change in order to meet the needs of today's learners. The study provides recommendations for areas including English Language Learners; under-qualified staff; the over-representations of minority students and Special Education populations; alignment of curriculum, assessment, and instruction; progress reviews; length of stay; and safety. Elements of this report hit both academic and social aspects;however, it takes an outsiders approach about the need to fix a broken system and does not account for how stakeholders would view these changes or how it can be assured that student achievement will improve through these modifications.

Darlene Leiding (Leiding, 2008) dedicates a chapter in her book *The Hows and Whys of Alternative Education* to alternative schools and their role in helping non-traditional students find success. She highlights examples of students who may have otherwise dropped out but instead became productive members of society after being placed in alternative settings. According to her research, the benefits of such placement include specific programming for at-risk youth and non-traditional routes for diplomas. She discusses the barriers of a lack of funding, and school and professional attitudes towards these students and programs. Additionally, she cites a general misunderstanding of the programs and a lack of support from the community. The discussion of these barriers is of particular interest because the book does not provide any data to support these statements and does not suggest any ways in which the author may have gathered

the information included. Further study of the perceptions of those surrounding AEDY programs could help to bring credence to her statements.

In their study published through Southern Illinois University at Carbondale, Foley and Pang (2006) focused on AEDY programs and student characteristics. The study sought to examine the funding sources and facilities of AEDY programs as well as the support services available for the student population. A survey was administered to program directors and principals of alternative programs asking them to address issues including the structure of the program, the funding sources, and the quality of the resources available. Most responses indicated that funding was a source of difficulty for essential program function, that off-site placement made resources difficult to come by, and that youth with special education needs were particularly difficult to serve. While beneficial to this area of study, this research does not address the perceptions of the sending district administrators and does not provide clear evidence that any of the above topics overwhelmingly affect the success of students in alternative placements.

Critical Analysis

It is important to understand the history of public schooling and alternatives to public schooling before taking a look at the needs of alternative programs for at-risk youth. A review of the literature shows an understanding of the unique needs of at-risk youth who have disengaged from school, as well as urgency in drop out prevention. It does not, however, indicate a solution for public school entities faced with providing alternatives to these students. Additionally, it does not provide information into how the

school setting itself could impact student success, and rather tends to focus on the student as the problem. A focus on the availability of quality programs as well as the role of school administrators in student placement will allow this research to add to the available literature for future study.

As much of the literature is focused on regulations surrounding these programs and not on the programs themselves, it may be beneficial to look at existing programs and determine if they match the needs of the students they are intended to serve. Based on the review of literature, the following key propositions have been developed to guide this study:

1. A focus on the school setting itself, not only on student characteristics, could aid in determining the potential success of an at-risk student in an alternative setting.
2. It is possible that some key decision makers do not have adequate knowledge of, or experience with, AEDY programs to fully understand the purpose, benefits/drawbacks to students, and/or the referral process.
3. It is possible that there is a direct link between opportunities for alternative education (or lack thereof) and the prevention of at-risk youth dropping out.
4. It is possible that there is a mismatch between available programs and student need.

Conceptual Framework

As outlined in the Pennsylvania School Code, Chapter 4, "Public education prepares students for adult life by attending to their intellectual and developmental needs and challenging them to achieve at their highest level possible. In conjunction with families and other community institutions, public education prepares students to become self-directed, life-long learners and responsible, involved citizens" (22 Pa. Code § 4.11). Most view successful completion of high school and diploma attainment as the culmination of this mission.

However, for the at-risk student, there may be significant barriers to school completion. Both internal and external forces impede these students from reaching high school graduate status, causing significant impact to the individual, the school community, and society at large. Identified as "push and pull" effects, there are a variety of explanations for why students drop out of school (Jordan, McPartland, & Lara, 1999). Push effects are located within the school itself, and often manifest in disruptive behavior, truancy, and lack of academic effort. Traditional consequences including suspension, failure, and truancy citations often have the unintended consequence of pushing students further away rather than towards success. Pull effects are factors that compete with the goal of school completion and may include factors such as having to work to support family, becoming pregnant, or having friends/family members who have dropped out (Lehr et al., 2005).

Some at-risk youth posses characteristics of resiliency and are able to overcome the barriers listed above with either individual characteristics (intellectual ability, high

self-esteem, faith, positive social relationships) or contextual characteristics (effective parenting, guidance from adult figures, access to high-quality schools) (Lehr et al., 2005). Similarly, the idea of grit has entered the discussion as a necessary trait for success in life. Individuals who possess grit have a "perseverance and passion for long term goals. Grit entails working strenuously toward challenges, maintaining effort and interest over years despite failure, adversity, and plateaus in progress" (Duckworth, Peterson, Matthews, & Kelly, 2007). For others, as is the focus of this study, access to alternative education may provide a pathway to successful school completion despite the barriers. Effective alternative schools are designed to reengage students in the educational process through low teacher-student ratios, a focus on relationship building, and an opportunity to work on the root factors contributing to disengagement through mandatory counseling components (Quinn, Poirier, Faller, Gable, & Tonelson, 2006).

Unfortunately, thousands of Pennsylvania's students still drop out of school each year (Pennsylvania Department of Education, 2012a). In addition to looking at the characteristics of the individual student, it may also be helpful to look at what role the school plays in the student's ultimate decision to leave early. Additionally, alternative schools can also serve as a way for students who have dropped out to have an opportunity to drop back into school again, with programs specifically designed to help students who have preciously dropped out reach school completion through diploma or General Education Development (GED).

Figure 2 below is a visual representation of the components of the conceptual framework. As discussed throughout the literature review, at-risk youth face barriers and

obstacles to successful school completion. Some students are unable to overcome these obstacles and barriers and, as such, drop out of school without degree attainment. Others, however, do reach graduation through either placement in Alternative Education Programs, the presence of resiliency factors, or a combination of both.

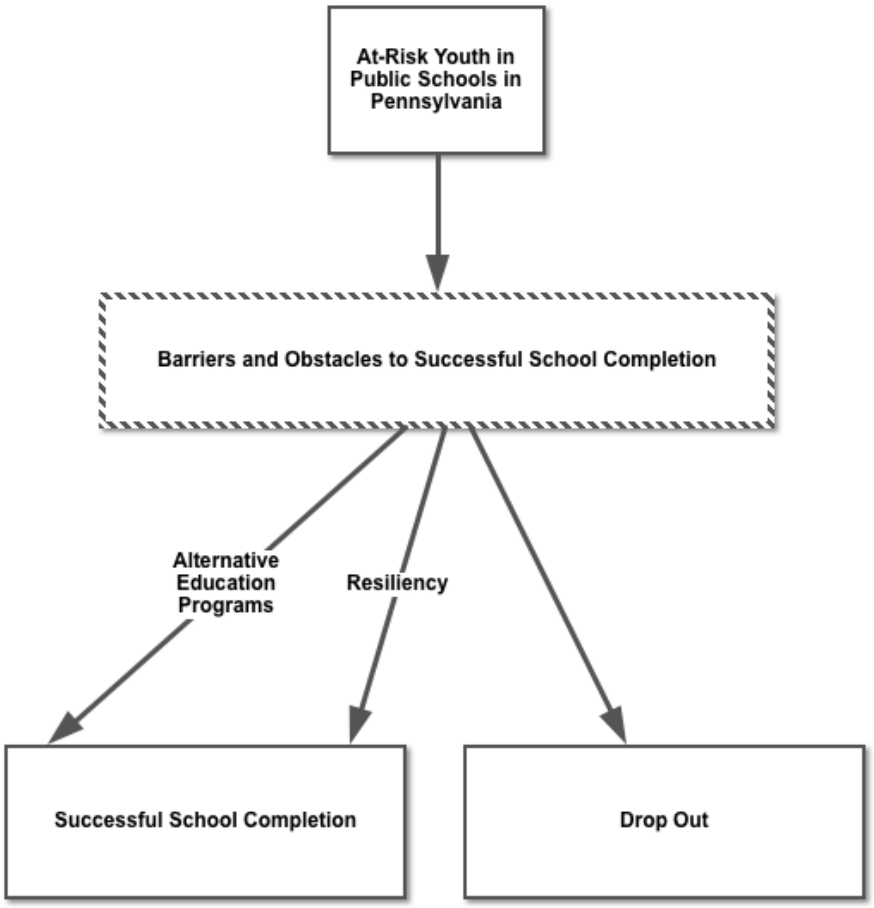

Figure 2: Diagram of Conceptual Framework

Summary

The literature suggests a need for further study surrounding at-risk youth, disengagement, and the impact alternative programs have on student success. The barriers and obstacles that at-risk youth face can lead them to drop out of school if an intervention such as Alternative Education placement is not introduced. However, with an increased focus surrounding the appropriate placement of students in alternative programming, it is becoming more important to identify the reasons behind student placement, as well as the available options for all students to find success. Recent state and national guidelines continue to stress the importance of attainment of a high school diploma, and as stated above, high school dropouts are also linked to increased health risks, welfare participation, habitual unemployment, crime involvement and time in prison (Harlow, 2003; Sanchez & Wertheimer, 2011; The Alliance, 2013).

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Research Question

The goal of this study was to explore the perceptions of district officials and key decision makers surrounding at-risk youth and AEDY placement. The study looked to answer the following research question and related sub questions:

How do educators perceive Alternative Education and At-risk Youth?

a. To what extent do educators understand AEDY? (Intent and compliance)
b. What other factors (i.e. budget, location) play a role in student placement?

This study was qualitative and utilized the generic approach to qualitative research described by Lichtman (2012, p.114). A qualitative approach was most appropriate for this study because: reality was constructed by the observer; subjectivity based on the role of the researcher was expected; the researcher was central to the study; interpretations were based on the researcher's experience and background; the goal was not to generalize but to allow others to apply to their own situations; it involved a small, nonrandom sample; data was analyzed with codes and themes; and the overall findings are written in less formal, more personal way.

The case study approach, as described by Lichtman (Lichtman, 2013), is an in-depth examination of a single entity, with a focus on a particular program, project, or

setting (Lichtman, 2013, pp. 90–91). Yin states that case study should be used when (1) the main research questions are 'how' or 'why' questions; (2) a researcher has little or no control over behavioral events; and (3) the focus of study is a contemporary (as opposed to entirely historical) phenomenon" (Yin, 2013, p. 2). Yin further states that in case study research there are five components that are of particular importance. These include, the questions, the propositions, the unit of analyses, the linking of data to the propositions, and the criteria for interpreting the findings (Yin, 2013, p. 29).

Research Context and Demographics

The Park Run School District (PRSD) is one of thirteen school districts in Penns County, Pennsylvania (a pseudonym for the county). Situated in the northwest corner of the county, PRSD covers roughly 72 square miles and serves students in the six surrounding communities. Two other local school districts complete the area schools that each send students to the local Career and Technical School (CTC), one of three CTCs in Penns County. According to the PDE's School Performance Profile (SPP) site, in 2013-2014 the school district had an enrollment of 5287 students, 275 of whom also attended the CTC. Specific demographic information can be seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Demographic Data

Student Groups	Percent Enrollment
Race	
African American	1.91
American Indian	0.19
Asian	2.95
Caucasian	86.44
Hispanic	6.20
Multi Racial	2.17
Pacific Islander	0.13
Economically Disadvantaged	27.6
English Language Learner	1.82
Special Education	14.45

The district's mission is to promote its 5,500 students to become lifelong learners, who are able to pursue academic excellence, exhibit personal responsibility, provide service to the community, and respect oneself, others, and the environment.

Data Collection

The primary motivation of this study was to gain insight into the availability of, and placement into, AEDY programs in Penns County, specifically for PRSD. In order to accomplish this goal, it was necessary to identify participants who have adequate involvement and authority in recommending student placements as well as those who work directly with at-risk youth. With regard to PRSD, the following key district employees were identified: District level administrators; School level administrators; and

Support professionals. Table 3 outlines the sample with regard to these positions, described in greater detail below.

Table 3: Research sample

Position	Possible	Actual
District Level Administrators	N=10	N=4
School Level Administrators	N=14	N=8
Support Professionals	N=22	N=10

District Level Administrators

At the time of this research, there were ten administrators (N=10) working at Park Run's District Office. The group is comprised of individuals that include the superintendent; assistant superintendent; director of pupil services; supervisor of special education; two curriculum directors; director of human resources; director of technology; supervisor of special programs; and the business director.

For the purposes of this study, this group was narrowed down to those individuals who had adequate involvement and authority in alternative placements. This can be further defined as those who have direct or indirect oversight over these processes or in setting the mission and vision for at-risk youth in the district. Their perceptions influence their respective decisions regarding alternative programming and, as such, represented a

key focus group for this study. They included the superintendent, director of pupil services, supervisor of special education, and supervisor of special services (N=4).

School Level Administrators

Park Run has ten school buildings: six elementary schools, two middle schools, a Freshman Center, and a High School. Each elementary building has one principal as do each of the middle schools. One of the middle schools, which is double the size of the second (N=856; N=420), also has an assistant principal. Although two separate buildings, the freshman center and senior high school operate under one principal, with an assistant principal assigned to each grade, 9-12. Although alternative placement is certainly possible for students in elementary school, it was not the focus of this study. Additionally, far fewer placements occur at the middle level. For this reason, this stakeholder group consisted of those most directly involved in placement including the high school principal and assistant principals, a former high school principal, and two middle school administrators (N=8). This group is typically responsible for the administrative and disciplinary interactions with at-risk youth as well as being the first level of decision makers surrounding alternative placement. As such, their perceptions surrounding at-risk youth, alternative programming, and student placement had the best chance of providing the necessary information to answer this study's questions and to the provide insight into the stated propositions.

Support Professionals

This stakeholder group includes a variety of individuals who work directly with students on a daily basis in non-teaching roles. Individuals in this group vary in years of service in education, degrees and certifications, prior experience in teaching positions, salary, and current position. Those who have adequate involvement with at-risk students and alternative placements include school guidance counselors and teachers currently serving on the Student Assistance Program (SAP) team. As with the decision to include only certain administrators, elementary and middle school counselors, as well as high school counselors that do not work directly with at-risk youth were not included in this study, leaving four counselors. Although significantly more classroom teachers are trained in the SAP model than those listed here, only the six individuals who currently serve an active role on the High School SAP team were interviewed for this study (N=10).

Framework for Data Collection

As shown in Figure 3 below, within the context of the case study at PRSD, data collection strategies included a document analysis, which was used along with the research question to inform the interviews. Data from the administrative interviews were also used during support professional interviews. New information gleaned from support professional interviews further informed follow-up interviews that were held with four administrators.

Figure 3: Diagram of Research Design

*Interview*s

The primary method for data collection for this study was interviews. The PRSD district officials and key personnel involved in student referrals, as described above, were asked a series of standardized questions to better understand their practices and beliefs in regard to at-risk students, AEDY programs, and student placements. These questions were piloted prior to use with a non-study participant who has an understanding of the research topic. This pilot experience allowed me to seek feedback and critique of the questions prior to their use in this study. According to Yin, "one of the most important sources of case study evidence is the interview" (Yin, 2013, p. 110). Using *in-depth qualitative interviewing*, interviews allowed me to receive detailed information rather than yes-or-no answers. It also allowed for the use of open-ended questions that permitted the respondent to elaborate on answers, and raise new issues. The questions did not have to be fixed, allowing me to skip questions that did not fit as part of the conversation and to also use additional follow-up questions to respond to new insights (Rubin & Rubin, 2012).

Interviews followed a *semi-structured* approach. In this approach, interviews were scheduled and a set of questions was developed in advance, but it was also understood that the interview would take place as a conversation, with follow-up questions asked as appropriate. Although this approach allowed the interviewee freedom in how the questions were answered, it also allowed the interviewer to maintain a focus on planned items directly related to the research questions (Lichtman, 2013; Rubin & Rubin, 2012). Two interviews were scheduled for each participant. The first allowed for the formal interview that was recorded and transcribed. The second was conducted on an as-needed basis and served as a follow up to ensure the data collected was accurate and to allow for additional questions to be asked. This second interview occurred with four participants.

Interviews began with district office administrators, followed by school-based administrators. Finally, interviews occurred with support professionals in an effort to determine if there is consistency among the three levels and also to see how each unique position plays into working with at-risk youth and making the decision to place students alternatively. The interview questions (Appendix C) were mapped to the research questions and sub questions, and tied to a proposition where applicable (Appendix B).

Document Analysis

The purpose of the document analysis was to examine historical records related to the topic at hand. It was a "critical inquiry into past events to produce an accurate description and interpretation of those events, their meeting and implications for the

present day" (Anderson & Nihlen, 2007, p. 205). A review of these documents informed interview questions, and interview protocols. Anderson cautions that while there are advantages to using data that are already "created," the data analysis may also pose challenges in that the records may be incomplete or inaccessible, or may not provide the information the necessary to move forward (Anderson et al., 2007). This was found to be true in this research. The purpose of the data analysis was to find available demographic information as well as to uncover past practices, policies, and information regarding alternative education. Ultimately, the demographic data proved useful however much of the other data were incomplete and/or unable to be verified.

Examples of documents analyzed include:

- PRSD enrollment, demographic, and referral data
- PDE AEDY documents including enrollment, policies, guidelines, and forms
- PRSD Board Policies regarding alternative placements

In their discussion of document analysis, (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) state that "documents are most useful when combined with in-depth interviews that allow you to discuss with their creators what they contain and how they were prepared" (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 27). Wherever possible, the individuals interviewed with direct knowledge of the documents reviewed were asked questions related to those documents in an effort to gather additional information.

Data Analysis

Analysis of the data collected began as soon as the first interview was completed and continued throughout the research process. I kept notes and used memos to keep track of what was seen and heard in the data, read the interview transcripts upon completion, listened to the recordings to ensure accuracy, and reviewed the documents to be analyzed. This ensured that there was an opportunity to begin to look for common themes and relationships as they emerged.

The process for writing these memos, and for identifying the overarching concepts, followed Lichtman's model, The Three Cs of Data Analysis: Codes, Categories, Concepts (Lichtman, 2013, p. 252), which uses the initial raw data to develop an initial set of codes or summary ideas of the given responses. Next those codes were revisited to collapse and rename the redundant codes. At this point, the analysis could move from codes to categories, which allowed for the codes to be organized into major topics and subtopics. Once the categories were identified, it was important to revisit them just as the codes were revisited, ensuring that topics were not redundant and to make certain that the selected topics were relevant and addressed the original research questions. Finally, the analysis could move from categories to concepts, where a few, well-developed concepts were defined to provide the meaning to attach to the data collected (Lichtman, 2013, p. 254). The process also closely aligned to the constant-comparative method, which is associated with grounded theory (Corbin & Strauss, 2014; Lichtman, 2013). As described by Lichtman (2013), the constant-comparative method starts with open coding (developing names and categories), then moves to axial coding (relating initial codes to one another), and finally selective coding (selecting the most

important codes). At this point, a hierarchy was developed and the selected codes were organized to represent the key themes.

Researcher roles

In the current position at Park Run School District, I had a direct connection with many of the participants of this study. Although this was beneficial because of the ease of access to the documents and individuals necessary to complete the data collection, it also brought about a concern about validity. In a previous position, I was one of the key individuals who would have been interviewed in this study, having served as a building level administrator and having had involvement in placement of students. Additionally, I was a part of regular conversations about this topic with at least some of those who have been identified as participants through my previous job responsibilities as the districts' K-12 Student Assistance Program Coordinator and as the liaison for the high school's most commonly used AEDY placement.

Since it was not possible to eliminate all potential biases and perceptions, it was necessary for me to fully understand how my values and expectations could influence the conclusions of the findings and to ensure these influences were completely removed from the study. In order to accomplish this, the questions were piloted with a non-study participant to ensure that the spirit of the questions were focused directly on the research questions and did not include any potential biases. Additionally, questions were clearly framed in such a way as to allow the interviewee to do the majority of the talking, without interference from me.

Issues of validity

This study falls under the realm of *participant observation* and was an *overt participant observation*, meaning that the true identity of the researcher as well as the purpose of the research were made clear to those involved (Jupp, 2006). Because of the connection to the study and the selected site, it was particularly important to articulate the purpose of this study, the intentions of the questions and the research, and in general the academic nature of this work throughout the process. Participants were informed that the data would be anonymized and that they would not be used for any other purpose than this study. Because of the potential difficulties with documenting accurately while being an engaged participant in the discussions and interviews, additional methods including written notes and audio taping with transcription were used to allow for further review of the responses and to ensure accuracy.

CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

Overview

The focus of this study was to discover the perceptions of alternative programs, specifically those labeled as Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY) placements, as well as the perceptions of at-risk youth and disengagement from school, by school officials and key educators charged with working with these students and making the decision to place students outside of the traditional school setting. The data were collected with regard to the following research question and subquestions.

How do educators perceive Alternative Education and At-risk Youth?

a. To what extent do educators understand AEDY? (Intent and Compliance)
b. What other factors (i.e. budget, location) play a role in student placement?

This chapter reports the findings of this case study through outlining participant responses. The interviews were recorded, transcribed and coded. As stated by Maxwell, "In qualitative research, the goal of coding is not primarily to count things, but to … rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category and that aid in the development of theoretical concepts" (2013, p. 107). Utilizing Saldaña's First Cycle and Second Cycle coding (Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2013, pp. 73–74), each interview was initially coded and then further refined to remove codes that were either redundant or extraneous. The process of inductive coding was used as "codes emerged progressively during the data collection" (Miles et al., 2013, p.

81) rather than beginning with predetermined codes, also known as a priori coding. The first cycle codes utilized "In Vivo Coding" which "uses words or short phrases from the participant's own language" (Miles et al., 2013, p. 74). The findings are reported in this chapter as they relate to the research question and the themes identified from the coding process. Further analysis of the findings, themes, recommendations, and suggestions for future study are outlined in Chapter 5.

Each participant was assigned a pseudonym to allow for anonymity. The participants were also organized by their job category as follows: District Administrator School Administrator, Guidance Counselor, and Classroom Teacher. As outlined in Chapter 3 of this study, each participant was selected based on his/her involvement in working with students who are considered to be at-risk as well as involvement and authority over student placement in alternative settings. A brief description with regard to gender and years of educational experience for each of the participants is listed in Appendix D.

The findings section is organized by three overarching themes: People, Placement, and Practice. People, in the case of this study, refers to the students themselves, those that have been identified as at-risk either academically or socially and emotionally. The second theme, placement, refers to the traditional public school setting as well as the available alternative settings. Finally, the third theme, practice, refers to the reality of the interplay between the people and the placement. Each of these is further refined into subthemes and supported with quotes from the interviews that occurred during the data collection process.

Theme One: People

In line with the research question which asked about how educators perceived at-risk youth, much of the data collected throughout the interviews focused on individual students and groups of students who have been identified as at-risk. Participants were asked to define at-risk youth and, through their definitions, information was gathered surrounding the types of risk these students faced, thoughts on why students disengage from school, and the role each group surveyed plays in the life of an at-risk youth. Subthemes in this area include students who are at-risk academically vs. socially, the reasons why educators believe students ultimately choose to leave school prior to completion, and the role educators believe they play in at-risk youth's lives.

Subtheme 1.1: Concept of risk

The concept of "risk" itself was difficult to define and differed depending on the individual. Less than half of those interviewed provided responses that directly mentioned the idea of risk. In general, participants defined a student as at-risk when the student was not likely to successfully complete school (academic risk) or when the student was at-risk for social/emotional reasons (social risk).

Academic Risk

Of the ten participants who directly discussed risk, five of them noted academics exclusively in their definition for a student to be labeled at-risk. The idea of not graduating on time, or with the cohort was a reoccurring concept, possibly due to the

Commonwealth's change in graduation rate calculations which only count students as graduates if they graduate with their 4-year cohort ("4-year Cohort Graduation Rate Calculation," 2011). Megan, a school administrator, said that "an at-risk youth would be a student who likely or possibly will not graduate with their cohort." Ian, also a school administrator, agreed, adding that an at-risk youth could be defined as "any kid that anybody characterizes as a student that may not graduate with his or her cohort." "It's any student who is in danger of failing," said another school administrator, Neal. He further defined failing as "failing the class, failing out of school, not graduating with their cohort, or in some way putting themselves in jeopardy for not being successful academically."

Sarah, a classroom teacher, felt as though a student should be labeled as at-risk when he "has influences that are impeding his learning." Mary, a school administrator, shared that "an at-risk youth would be any student who is exhibiting behaviors or choices, or who has a lifestyle outside of school that is in any way preventing them from being successful as a student." She continued by sharing a story of a student who

> "seemed like he had everything going for him. He was academically inclined, taking a number of Honors and AP classes. He seemed like he had a number of friends and teachers generally thought of him in a positive manner. Unfortunately, he became involved in some out of school activities that started to creep into school and affect his academics. It was hard at first to label him as an at-risk youth because this isn't what we typically think of. But at this point, his behaviors – his decisions – were making it such that he wasn't able to be successful academically anymore. That's what at-risk is."

Social Risk

Two participants chose social risks as the primary qualification for a student to be labeled at-risk. To Bob, a district administrator, "at-risk can mean a lot of things, but mostly those students that fit into subgroups like low socio-economic status." Grace, a school administrator, focused on the home environment in her response, stating that she thinks, "at-risk youth are at-risk for a variety of reasons. Many times its poverty or their home lives – the environment that they've come from."

Academic and Social Risk

The final three interviewees that discussed factors for which students could be identified as at-risk identified students as equally at-risk for both academic and social reasons. Beth, a school administrator, said, "They could be at-risk academically, they could be at-risk socially, and emotionally, they could be at-risk because of family, they could be at-risk because of peers. To me, every kid has the potential of being at-risk." Ed, a guidance counselor, noted the different perspectives one could take when defining a student as at-risk, looking at both the school setting and beyond when he said, "from an educational perspective, you could say a student is at-risk academically if you're concern is that they won't be able to keep up with their cohort, but I'd say in my position of guidance, I think of someone who's at risk to make life decisions that are not going to be productive beyond the classroom."

Brad shared that a significant part of his job as a guidance counselor is spent working with at-risk youth. When asked to further define what he meant by the term, he shared that "a youth may be at-risk economically, or it might be socially." He continued,

"whether there's an educational issue that puts them at a disadvantage or it's anything that would place a student at a greater risk than the typical population for any of the pitfalls you can come up with: drop out, criminal justice, pregnancy, mental health, drug and alcohol, low educational performance."

Of the eight building level administrators who were interviewed, six had responses that outlined their definition of what it means to be an at-risk youth. All but one chose academic risk as the reason (some in combination with social risk) however no other group interviewed chose academic risk as the sole reason besides the school administrators. This focus on academics as the basis for at-risk youth identification could play into the perceptions these administrators have about at-risk youth and about what type of supports they need. Through these responses, it is possible to surmise that the majority of school administrators interviewed for this study believe students to be at-risk when they may not graduate and fail to recognize the potential for students to be at-risk for the variety of other reasons mentioned by other participants.

Subtheme 1.2: Reasons for drop out

The focus of this section of data is on educator perceptions regarding the determining factors once a student has disengaged to the point where he or she decides to leave school. All twenty-two participants identified clear reasons why they perceive students to leave school prior to completion. Responses can generally be grouped into two categories: push effects (elements of the school or setting) and pull effects (elements of personal or home life) (Jordan et al., 1999). However, some respondents indicated that

the reason for dropout was related to the student's personal characteristics, that it in fact had to do with a student's personality and mental state more than other competing factors. These responses could not easily be attributed to either push or pull effects and as such became their own response category.

While nearly all responses in the push effect category noted relationships with the school and the staff, no classroom teacher noted this as a reason they believe students disengage. This finding could provide a better understanding of the lack of connection some classroom teachers have with their students and the effect that lack of connection may have on at-risk youth. To that end, five out of six classroom teachers interviewed chose pull effects as their perceived reason for student dropout. It appears that while school administrators see the lack of connection to school, teachers see only outside forces at play.

Push Effects

Participants who identified push effects listed reasons for dropout such as disliking school and its structure, falling behind with schoolwork, or a lack of relationships with school staff or with the school itself. For the majority of participants, the focus was on the school itself. When asked about the reason he believes students choose to leave school, Brad said, "I think the biggest factor is a lack of connection to their school." Bob agreed, stating, "I think the structure of the school itself, and the lack of relationships. Those are the big ones. We are basically making it very difficult for these kids to want to stay." He continued by sharing a story about a student who opened up to him about why he was leaving school. "He told me that he didn't feel like anyone

cared about him. The worst part was when he said no one would notice if he left. For me, that was like, wow, we really messed up with this kid." This was similar to Megan's sentiment, "I think probably the biggest factor is the student feels that there's nobody that really cares." Mary also noted "a lack of connection to the school community." She shared that "it seems that these students are not necessarily involved and integrated into the school community whether that's because they don't participate in any school activities or if it's because they don't interact with peers or adults." When asked if she could provide anything further she stated, "they just don't necessarily appear to feel like they belong in the setting that they are in." Paige, a guidance counselor, shared the idea of a general sense of not belonging. "I think school is a tough place for kids. They don't feel like they belong and they don't feel like anyone understands them. I'm not sure how much we do to try to fix that as a school community."

The structure and rules of the setting were also listed as push effects by Ian who added that "school can be an incredibly boring place for kids…where kids are not given any choices over their learning" and Grace who thinks " the structure of the school is often the biggest factor. The structure and the rules." Adding in the idea of academic difficulties, Neal said, "It is their belief that they will not be able to be successful academically and they won't be able to graduate. In addition the school setting we provide isn't working for them." Fran expanded on the role academic difficulties may play. "I feel that for the kid's I've worked with that have dropped out, school has not been a positive experience for many of them since elementary school. The school environment has a negative connotation. They haven't developed strong relationships

with adults in the building. I feel that they get behind and it's a domino effect. Once they fail one grade [they] just don't see any other way out."

Pull effects

Participants who noted pull effects selected reasons for dropout related to external factors. Carl, a district administrator, believes that "these students come from tough backgrounds" and that "they may have to work to support their families." Kate, a classroom teacher, also discussed "the burden in [their] lives outside of school" as a barrier as did Ellen, also a classroom teacher, who noted that "they have other things going on in their lives that [are] more important."

"Other things, like a lack of family support or even [starting] their own families and being a teenage parent, are really important factors that compete with attending school," said Don, a classroom teacher. Luke and Ellen also mentioned family citing a lack of "structure at home" and "not having a lot of support at home." Sarah went as far as to say that some students "are supported in their decision to leave school by their family" and that "the student is not able to see the value in the education process and they don't see how an education will ultimately provide them with more opportunity in life."

Personal Characteristics

Additional responses were grouped into a category called personal characteristics. Many noted responses, such as " hopelessness" (Terry, Beth), "underlying mental health, untreated mental health issues" (Kelly), "drug and alcohol concerns" (Kelly, Ed) and "social and emotional" (Liz) concerns. Liz continued that she "doesn't think it has anything to do with if they feel they can academically do it," but that "their personality

and disposition are getting in the way. Kevin, a school administrator, also noted personality saying that the decision to leave school early "comes down to personality. I think it's a personality flaw."

Although included in these findings as a separate category, the idea of the role of personality might be a by-product of either a push or a pull effect. Further study would be needed to see if these issues really occur in isolation or if they were the product of, for instance, lacking connections in school or having outside family issues.

Subtheme 1.3: Role educators play

The third identified subtheme with regard to the students themselves is the role educators can or do play in the lives of at-risk youth. In continuing with the stated research question, discovering educator perceptions of their role with regard to students whom they have identified as at-risk is important. Participants were asked to discuss the role they believe district administrators, school administrators, guidance counselors, and classroom teacher's play (or should play) in the lives of at-risk students. Responses tended to focus on the individuals view of the role they played, although some responses also highlighted the role those educators believe others should play.

District Office Personnel

All district office personnel noted their role in working with at-risk youth through their responses. They believed it was important to focus on "setting an agenda to make sure that they care for the needs of at-risk learners" (Bob) and to have "policies in place

to support at-risk youth" (Neal). Carl said that district office administrators need to play a "key role in making sure that every child has their needs met, no matter what they are." Speaking about the need to create a system, Kelly noted that District Office personnel should ensure that "those in charge have the tools they need" and Grace continued saying that "[they] need to consider the system and the mandates." Grace, Beth, and Mary all shared similar beliefs that district office personnel should "include the building administrators" in their decisions. Additionally, both Terry and Luke felt the primary reason for involvement of district office personnel was due to the "significant funding that has to go into a program" and the need to "get the finances available" respectively.

District administrator and school administrator responses were generally in line with each other, focusing on system building, requirements and mandates, policies and finances as top priorities. It was not clear, however, whether these individuals believe that clear policies, procedures, or systems are in place, or whether they were simply indicating these to be a part of their perceived role.

Building Administration

With regard to the role building administrators play, the responses indicate that it has much to do with the personal characteristics of the administrators themselves. However, a common theme appears to be the need to be seen as more than a disciplinarian, and to instead connect with students, form relationships, and ensure they have the resources they need to be successful. According to Kelly, the role of a building administrator in the life of an at-risk student is to "really try to figure out what's going on with students." She continues, "they are directly involved with students who struggle

often times because of the associated behaviors. But when they forge a relationship with them, when they lead the student to get help from a counselor or social worker, they can have a huge impact. Often times the principal or assistant principal is seen as the disciplinarian. They don't recognize the lasting impact they can have by reaching out and taking that first step to learn more about the student. To be seen as a human being." Ian, agreed, but stated that it "depends on the qualities and characteristics of that principal whether they have any daily personal involvement." Grace also noted the need to "form relationships and let the students know he or she has a place to go" but also mentioned another important role, which is to "support the teachers, give them the professional development and resources they need to help the students in their classrooms." As Fran states, the "principal should be accessible, not just seen as a disciplinarian or authoritative figure."

Some responses, however, did not mention the relationship building factor and instead focused on "making the decision when it's time to place a student alternatively" (Beth) and to "make sure that there are programs in place within the building" (Mary).

Guidance Counselors

Both district and school administrator responses with regard to the role guidance counselors play centered around the need to be heavily involved and serve as the primary point person. Bob called guidance "the hub between the principal and teacher and the student" indicating "they make sure that the programs that are provided are what the student actually needs." Terry also noted the importance of being "heavily involved" and "having appointments on a regular basis" with students identified as at-risk. Megan said

that guidance counselors are "ideally the ones that would have the most nurturing, supportive kind of relationship" with at-risk youth, serving as a "great mentor for students who need an outlet" (Grace). In order to accomplish this, Liz suggests, "Guidance counselors need to be a little more involved in checking in with students regularly." Kelly further defined the role of a counselor in PRSD, sharing her belief that "in this district, the guidance counselor needs to play the part of a social worker as well as a counselor" in order to meet student needs in and out of school.

Although it was noted by district and school administrators that the role of the guidance counselors should be to check in regularly with students and act as a mentor and support system, guidance counselor responses with regards to how they interpret their role did not align. Counselors understood the enormity of the role they were being asked to play in at-risk youth's lives, and did state that they believed themselves to be part therapist, part role model, and all advocate. However, responses also noted the fact that they did not feel supported in their ability to do this because of a lack of time, high caseloads, and a lack of available resources. This disconnect is an important finding and warrants further discussion to determine the cause of the breakdown between job responsibilities/expectations and the factors that inhibit counselors from reaching them.

Ed said of his fellow counselors "we recognize how important our role is in the lives of at-risk youth." He continued, "however, there are so few of us and so many of them." When asked directly about the impact the caseload numbers have on counselors, he responded "sometimes its hard to make the kind of connection, and spend the time we need to, with each kid." This sentiment was echoed by the other counselors, including Fran who said that counselors "try to spend the necessary time with each student" but that

"many of them need personal, outside therapists." She continued, "we do the best we can to be an advocate for all of our students." Paige also mentioned the idea of advocacy when she said, "we are the advocates for these students." In reference to the relationship she has with her students, she spoke on behalf of her colleagues saying "we know their backstories and they often times will talk to just us. This creates a problem when we are the only ones they will talk to because we aren't always able to be available for them when they are in crisis."

Classroom Teachers

District and school administrators, whose responses mentioned the role of the classroom teacher in the life of an at-risk youth, discussed the power of the teacher in supporting and engaging students. However, as Kelly suggests "they don't always realize that they have an incredible amount of power in helping at-risk youth to be successful." Grace stated that "a teacher is oftentimes the most positive role model in at-risk youth's life, helping to build their resiliency factors in ways that others can't." While Neal first noted, "the teacher is first and foremost responsible for insuring that the student has learned the standards," he further explained that "if they can build relationships with the students they will likely see them produce even better work." Megan discussed the importance of those relationships, saying "in many cases, because the student sees them on a daily basis, they may be the one that the student feels most comfortable talking to." She cautions, however, that without building this connection, or by appearing to not care about their students "they themselves could become the reason the student disengages from school."

None of the six classroom teachers interviewed offered responses related to their role in developing relationships with students who are at-risk. Kate felt it was the teacher's job to "work with each student to make sure we address the standards." Luke added that if "a student is having trouble, you have to reach our to guidance or admin" indicating his belief that his role is that of referrer. Sarah recognized the "lack of engagement" of some students and in conversation shared that she has had "many difficult to manage students." She focused on the need to give them "tough love" and further explained, "our job is to not let them make excuses. I get that a lot of these students have things going on that compete with school. But they want to make those excuses about why they can't get their homework done or why they don't study. A lot may be going on at home but school is their main responsibility at this time. I tell them this is like your job. And it's my job to make sure they are doing their job." When asked how this approach works with students, her response was "it works with some students. Those who it doesn't work for are choosing lack of success, in my opinion."

There is a clear disconnect between the role non-teachers believe classroom teachers should play and the belief of the role of the classroom teacher themselves. Based on these responses, it appears as though the very people charged with supporting at-risk youth on the day-to-day level lack the understanding of their role and of the factors that lead to disengagement from school. This is a dangerous combination for at-risk youth and must be addressed. While perhaps unintentionally, these behaviors allow the educators to become active contributors to the act of students dropping out of school.

Theme One Summary

Theme one provided important information with regard to the perceptions of educators with regard to at-risk youth, disengagement, and roles and responsibilities. The focus, at least for administrators, tended to be on the fact that at-risk students are not likely to graduate with their cohorts, affecting the school's graduation rate, that is, their part of the accountability process. Administrators noted the fact that there is a lack of connection between classroom teachers and at-risk students, but did not assert that they were actively working to change that. The first proposition offered through this study suggested a focus on the school setting to determine the success of a student in an alternative placement. Responses regarding the lack of school connection and difficulty with the school settings show support of the need to look at the setting itself as it could be a determining factor in ability to find educational success. Further support for this proposition can be found in the second theme, placement, as the data outline the differences in support and structure available within alternative settings.

Theme Two: Placement

Another portion of the data collected focused on educator perceptions surrounding student placements. The idea of the physical space and locations of the home school and alternative program were the focus of this theme. In answering the first research subquestion, it was necessary for the researcher to learn more about educator perceptions surrounding AEDY placements specifically, as well as their understanding of both the

intent of these placements as well as the actual process of referring a student to these placements.

Participants were asked to define alternative education and AEDY, provide their understanding of the referral process to an AEDY placement, and to share the factors that are considered when looking at a student's placement. Participants were first asked to give a working definition of alternative education. Eighteen participants provided some definition of what an alternative education setting means to them. Of those responses, sixteen described Raywid's (1994) Type II or Type III settings, which indicates that their perception of "alternative schooling" as a whole tends to be focused on last-chance programs as a result of disciplinary infractions. Additionally, as found in Type III programs, participants discussed these programs as having a remedial focus (either academically or emotionally). Only two participants gave examples of alternative settings that described Type I schools, or schools of choice.

Next participants were asked to provide working definitions of AEDY. The sixteen participants who described mostly Type II and Type III schools in their definitions of alternative education gave the same or similar definitions for AEDY. However, the two participants who gave Type I settings as responses to the definition of alternative education provided definitions in line with Type II settings when asked about AEDY, further supporting that they understood the differences between the terms.

It is possible that individuals are unaware of the differences because the district mostly utilizes a local, AEDY program for outplaced students. This placement has perhaps become synonymous with alternative education due to the number of students

who are enrolled each year. Data on the number of students placed in this setting, including the outcome of the placement, can be found in Appendix E.

Subtheme 2.1: Non-traditional nature/meeting students' needs

Responses in line with defining alternative education and AEDY were coded and categorized into subtheme 2.1, which explores the non-traditional nature of alternative education. Participants compared the differences between the "traditional" public school and alternative settings by describing both the available programming and the physical space. Programming that allowed the students to get what they needed, whether academically, socially or emotionally, was a recurrent theme in these responses. Interestingly, educators interviewed did not express that students could get the variety of programming needed through the current school setting. Additionally, discussion surrounding the traditional format of public schools, including the structure of the school day and the desks-in-rows layout of the classrooms were discussed as barriers to success for at-risk youth. Interestingly, the concerns over a "traditional" setting that does not meet student needs did not appear to transfer to the importance or benefits of a change in setting for the general population, only for the at-risk youth.

Bob defined alternative education, as "a place where students can get some diversity of programming, whether they need it for health issues or for academic or behavioral reasons, it's providing a different way for them to receive their education" serves as a representation for many of the responses. Terry added the idea of alternative education occurring "in a smaller setting that gives more on-to-one service delivery for

children who can't make it in the larger setting" which was also mentioned by several interviewees including Beth who stated that alternative education is about "going outside what we would deem the norm for kids. Finding a different approach, a different method, a different strategy to help some of those students who may not always feel comfortable in that traditional four-wall classroom" and Brad who noted that it exists to "meet a student's behavioral or emotional needs that the traditional environment can't." In her discussion of alternative schooling, Kate discussed the "change in setting for a student that struggles in the traditional setting" but expanded her definition to include the child remaining "within a traditional setting, just maybe with some accommodations in place."

Carl also discussed the change in setting saying, "It is a program that occurs outside of the regular school setting" but added "the ultimate goal is still high school graduation." Megan mentioned the change in setting with a goal of graduation saying, "It is a way of educating students outside of the traditional 8 to 3 school day, traditional classroom, 30 students, desks in rows, some other way to allow students to achieve their high school diplomas and receive an education." Ellen noted the difference between alternative settings and "the traditional environment with a teacher in front of rows of 30 kids." Tom discussed his experiences with students who were moved to alterative settings and shared how his view of these placements has changed. "To me, alternative education would mean any sort of educational programming or setting that is not what the majority of our students are experiencing. I used to think it had to be a specific placement but now I see there are a number of ways this can be accomplished. I think that we know because of differences in children sometimes there are better placements that can work for them and their significant needs– it should just be a different path to the

same end result. It really shouldn't be a negative, but unfortunately, it typically is. We end up referring students based on their behaviors but I'm not sure we dig deep enough to see why those behaviors are occurring." Sarah, a classroom teacher, echoed those comments, indicating that alternative education should mean "education outside the standard public school setting. Education that's differentiated towards the needs of the students when our school setting doesn't work for them."

While sharing their definitions of alternative education, several interviewees noted student behavioral or emotional concerns, including Bob who spoke about the struggling student. "Alternative education is a placement for a student who has, after multiple attempts to intervene during whatever struggle they are having academically, emotionally, socially, is still unsuccessful and it is determined that the student needs to have their education in another setting, usually a smaller, more supportive setting." Liz also highlighted the unsuccessful student saying, "To me, alternative education would be when a student, for some reason, is not showing success in a regular education setting like a public school. It's a different way for them to reach success that's not the traditional, typical, regular school day in a large classroom setting with one teacher in front of the class." Grace and Mary highlighted behavioral concerns in their responses regarding the purpose of alternative education, responding that it is "for students who don't fit in a regular setting, for whatever reason, usually behaviorally" and is "typically to serve disruptive kids" respectively.

As outlined above, most respondents identified alternative education as a placement for struggling students (Type II and II setting as described by Raywid (1994). A few respondents, including Ed, a guidance counselor, noted that alternative education

could "be anything from a family deciding to homeschool to choosing to enroll their student in a private school" (Type I settings as described by Raywid (1994). When asked to define AEDY, all but two participants gave answers that mirrored their responses to the previous question, indicating their belief that alternative education and AEDY are one in the same. The two participants who described Type I settings in the previous question provided different responses for this question which included Ed's response of "placement due to behavioral or mental health concerns" and Ellen's response of "repeated disciplinary infractions leading to the need to place the student elsewhere."

Subtheme 2.2: Referral Process

In order to gauge each participants understanding of the referral process to AEDY placements, and to seek an answer to the research sub question, participants were asked to share about their knowledge of, and experience with, the referral process to AEDY settings. Participants shared their understanding of the process of referrals as well as the philosophy behind implementing the process or in some cases, indicated that they were not familiar with the process.

Familiar with Process

Three school administrators and two guidance counselors provided responses that showed a solid understanding of the steps involved in a proper referral. These respondents also showed an understanding of the intent of process, citing the need for multiple interventions prior to placement, including the use of Truancy Elimination Plans

(TEP) and the Student Assistance Program (SAP). These individuals also cited the need for multiple meetings with all stakeholders, including the parents, and the need to be able to accurately document all interventions to show that the school had done everything possible to keep the student in the current setting prior to referral.

Grace shared that she has been involved in a number of referrals for her students and that the process has "changed quite a bit over the years." When asked to speak to the current process specifically, she continued, "the first step is really identification and then we move on to data collection. We look at the behaviors the student is exhibiting, try to work on interventions, and see if [the student] can be successful in our setting. We need to do a referral to the SAP team before we look at an alternative setting. If the modifications and interventions aren't working, then we can look to the referral process for AEDY, which is lengthy." She was asked to provide specifics regarding that process, if possible, and added, "we document everything we have tried and we only move forward if the students fit into one of the identified categories. Of course, sometimes because of the seriousness of the behavior, we don't have time for all of these steps and the student is moved to AEDY automatically in lieu of expulsion. We still report the interactions and describe the incident in detail. Everyone who sees the student – guidance, admin, teachers – has a part in that referral form."

Mary shared some additional details regarding the allowable referral reasons, stating, "if a student would begin displaying very poor attendance, regular disruptive behaviors, is involved in drug or alcohol issues, has a weapons offense, or something similar we would work to implement some support plans. But if, despite these plans, it's still not working we might identify the student for AEDY placement. We would have to

make sure that we had meetings with the student, parents, and guidance to determine if this is the best plan. We would need to make sure that we tried everything in our setting before we make the referral to an outside program." She added the "need to document clearly on the referral form all of the different interventions that have taken place to make sure this is the right setting for the student and to show that we really have tried everything we can to help the student" showing her understanding of the intent of the referral form.

Neal also referenced that there are "interventions that need to happen", giving specific examples such as the use of "Truancy Elimination Plans and team meetings" as well as "SAP referrals and sometimes even referrals to outside agencies" as well as the need to "meet with a counselor and principal." When asked what happens next, he responded, "if nothing is working, we move to the referral process and complete the state required paperwork to show that we have done everything possible before moving to alternative placement" once again indicating an understanding that the referral process is designed to ensure the district has identified students appropriately and that they have first tried appropriate interventions.

From the guidance counselor perspective, there was an understanding of the process and intent from both Fran and Brad. Fran indicated that she has been through the referral process "several times" and that "there is a difference in the past 5 years or so with the referral form." When asked to further expand upon her understanding of the process she shared that when referring a student, "we need to clearly show that we have tried multiple interventions for the child" and that it is not just about "deciding they can't make it in our building and sending them off." She continued, "The SAP process is used

to make sure the student has been recognized and refered. Truancy Elimination Plans are put into place for any student who is truant. We always try to make schedule modifications for students, hoping they can stay in the setting with these accommodations. We of course involve the parents and have multiple meetings with the student. If a referral is necessary after all of this, we have plenty of documentation for the referral form to justify why the student needs another opportunity outside of our setting." Brad offered a similar response, citing the need to "utilize all possible interventions, including SAP and TEP" and also to ensure that "parents, administration, guidance and the student are involved in meetings about what is going on".

In Fran's response, she shared a story about an administrator who "wanted a student gone, but there was no documentation." She continued, "This is the reason we have these forms. Yes, the process is tedious, but is designed to ensure that we keep as many students as we can in the regular setting and that students aren't sent to an alternative school just because someone doesn't like them."

Unfamiliar with Process

Conversely, one district administrator, three building administrators, one counselor, and four teachers responded that they were not aware of the process and procedures involved in AEDY referral. Noted as an outlier, one administrator was able to identify many of the steps involved in the referral process, but noted that it was from prior school experience and that he was unaware of the process in this district. As offered in proposition two, these responses support the concern that some key decision makers do not have adequate knowledge of the AEDY referral process.

Some participants, like Kelly, a district administrator, indicated being "unfamiliar with the process", but aware that "there's a whole packet you have to fill out and you have to follow the steps clearly." Because of the "lengthy packet", Kevin suggested having "the experts involved when going through the process." He continued, "I don't really know much about the documentation or all the different procedures you need to go through." Beth apologized for her lack of knowledge about the process saying, "I'm sorry. I'm embarrassed to say I actually don't know all of that. I know there's a process, but I just never got that involved with it, even as a building principal." Ed also indicated he was "not really familiar with the process" but indicated that it was due to an "administrative decision to put one counselor in charge of those things." Megan, who recently joined the administrative team at PRSD, shared that "having a formal process is new" to her, but that she "believe(s) the criteria involve truancy or being overage and under-credited." Her response shows not only a lack of understanding of the process, but also of the appropriate reasons for referral. This also reflects PRSD's current practices with training new employees on the policies and procedures surrounding AEDY referrals.

As noted above, Ian showed an understanding of the AEDY referral process by stating "In my previous district, we had really defined protocols for AEDY. We had teacher interventions, guidance interventions, then implemented behavior support plans. We utilized Truancy Elimination Plans, SAP referrals, anything we could do to help them. We actually had a checklist we went through on a referral form" but clearly connected that understanding to a previous position and went as far as to comment "I'm just not sure if that exists here in this district."

Four of the six classroom teachers provided responses that addressed AEDY referrals, sharing that they were disconnected from the process in that they were not sure what happened once a student left their classroom and often times the student would remain on their roles for several days or even weeks before they were made aware that there was a change. Additionally, they were often not prepared when a student returned from outplacement, in that they were both unaware the student was coming and unaware of the prior work the student may have done before returning to the classroom. This finding once again highlights the disconnect between classroom teachers and at-risk students.

With regard to the referral process, Kate indicated that she was "not sure" as did Ellen who said "I'm not really sure of the steps involved or what the process looks like." Luke thought "there's probably a procedure in place" but didn't know it "off the top of [his] head." Ellen summed up these responses, saying that "as a teacher, I don't really have an adequate understanding of the steps involved. As a matter of fact, I think it's safe to say I have no idea how it happens."

Subtheme 2.3: Factors considered prior to placement

The final subtheme includes responses that relate to the factors that administrators and counselors consider prior to, or during, the process of placing a student alternatively. The responses include procedural steps such as completing paperwork and having meetings, as well as additional considerations of either student and/or building needs.

Several responses also indicate a desire for students placed alternatively to make an eventual return to the traditional setting.

Process related

Of the fourteen responses from those who have adequate involvement in the decision to place students alternatively, four individuals noted that the most important factor to consider was whether or not the process had been followed correctly. Interestingly, none of the four indicated that they were familiar with the referral process in the earlier question. It appears as though these individuals either have a greater understanding of the process than they are aware, or that they know that the process is important without knowing what it involves. Either way, it will be important to determine where the breakdown is with regard to sharing information regarding placement with relevant district staff.

For example, Kelly said, "you have to be sure you have done everything so you can document on the referral form." Beth added, "We really make sure we met all of the steps in the referral process." Mary specifically mentioned the allowable reasons for referral in her response stating "you have to consider the allowable reasons for referral… whether or not they meet the criteria for placement." Neal shared that the factors he considers "are the critical attributes that are noted on the AEDY referral form."

In addition to following the steps of the process, educators also identified two major categories in their responses: looking at the needs of the individual students and looking at the needs of the entire building. One district administrator, one school administrator, and all four guidance counselors cited the needs of the individual student

as the most important factor when considering student placement. Perhaps not surprisingly, the guidance counselors (who under the people theme were noted as advocates for the student) understand and reassert that charge through their comments about ensuring the wellbeing of the student first and foremost. Additionally, several responses indicate the desire to rehabilitate the student and have them return to the regular setting, as described in Raywid's (1994) Type III settings. This, along with the focus on the benefits and drawbacks of placement for the actual student, show a level of understanding with regard to alternative placement, as outlined in proposition two.

Needs of the student

Six interviewees, including all four guidance counselors, gave responses that highlighted the importance of, as Bob stated, "what the kid really needs." He continued, "It's not just because the kid is truant or if he's been expelled. We also have to think about the kid who just doesn't fit within our traditional brick and mortar setting. We need to take the time to go back and figure out what broke down and what we can do to help build that student up. So many times AEDY is a location you go to because you meet criteria. We need to make sure the AEDY meets the criteria of the student's needs." This idea of student focus was echoed by Liz who added "we need to think about what the student needs and what type of setting is best going to help them in the short term but also provide them with what they need to be successful after school. It's about hoping they can return to our school building." As noted by Liz, the idea of the AEDY placement being "temporary", and the student being "able to return to the setting" is a critical understanding. Ed mentioned this as well in his discussion of the factors he considers saying, "I really try to look at the needs of the student and make sure we are doing

everything possible. I try a lot of interventions to keep them in the building, schedule changes, reduced schedules, and things like that. I try to get them whatever resources I can to meet their needs. If all of that doesn't work, I would look for another placement but I would still make sure to have the student's best interest in mind, letting them know we are here for them and we want them to come back once their needs have been addressed." Similarly, Brad stated that he believes that "as a guidance counselor, [placement] should be for the improvement of the student. I don't think alternative schools should be strictly punitive. I don't know that they should be punitive at all. I think they should be used in the least restrictive way possible and in a time limited manner to allow the students to gain the strategies they needs to eventually return to the traditional setting."

Continuing with the importance of looking at student needs as a key factor, Fran explained that she "looks at the students' needs academically as well as behaviorally" before making a decision to place a student. She continued, "If they are close, we may be able to make accommodations to help them finish in the setting" because in her opinion, "it's always better if they are able to be successful in their home school." Paige also noted the importance of making accommodations when possible in her response. She shared that she "considers what is best for the student in question. If the student is going to be more successful staying in the regular education setting, then we will need to work on some modifications to make that happen."

Needs of the building

In addition to looking at the process and at the needs of the individual student, four interviewees, all building level administrators, indicated that, as Megan stated, "our job is to look at the needs of the building. We have to make sure that one student doesn't harm the experience for the other thousand." Ian agreed saying, "first and foremost, "we have to consider the needs of the broader population, not just the student." He continued, "We need to look at the other 29 kids in the classroom and see how that student is impacting the other students because they all have needs as well." Additionally, two interviewees mentioned the idea of safety. Kevin stated that "safety is number one" for him and that he needs to "think of the generalization of the school, the whole school, every student and every teacher" when considering outplacement. Grace agreed saying, "We have to look at safety" adding that you "can't always worry about putting in interventions for the student … [you] have to think of the safety of the students in the building."

As mentioned above, only school administrators listed the needs of the building as the most important factor to consider. Perhaps this is because of the school administrator's chief role, which is to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all students. Further questioning would be necessary to determine if these individuals also think about the needs of the individual student (although perhaps secondarily) of if the needs of the building is all they are concerned with.

Theme Two Summary

Theme two focused on both the structure of the traditional setting and that of the potential alternative setting in an effort to determine the factors, if any, that impede or enhance student learning. It was clear that there was a lack of understanding by the majority of participants in the difference between alternative education, and AEDY with participants equating alternative education only with students with repeated or egregious behaviors or those who do not conform to the structure and rules of school. As presented in proposition two, the findings suggest that key personnel do not have adequate knowledge of, or experience with, the AEDY referral process or the reason for referral, potential leading to improper student placement.

Additionally, data collected in this theme addressed the factors considered prior to placement by administrators and counselors. Although four individuals noted the importance of following the referral process, none of those individuals indicated they knew or were comfortable with the aforementioned process. Additionally, counselors tended to focus on the needs of the students, in line with their role as advocates, while administrators tended to focus on the needs of the building.

Theme Three: Practice

The final theme represents the nexus of the first two, as participant responses highlight the interplay between the students and the schools, or in terms of themes, people and placement. Responses that centered on the reasons students are most commonly referred, perceptions surrounding inhibitors to placing students alternatively,

and suggestions for missing settings are included in this theme in order to address the second subquestion regarding the factors that play a role in student placement as well as the third proposition, the possibility of a direct link between opportunities for alternative education and the prevention of at-risk youth dropping out of school.

Subtheme 3.1: Reasons for referral

This category of responses outlines what administrators, counselors, and teachers perceive to be the most common reasons for referral to AEDY placements in the school district. The original coding of referral reasons organized the responses by the seven allowable AEDY referral reasons. However, upon further refinement of the codes, it became apparent that it would be more important to organize the responses by those that fall into one of the seven categories and those that do not in an effort to highlight current practices that are not in line with state mandates.

Responses falling into one of the seven categories

As referenced in the literature review, the Basic Education Circular (BEC) lists the seven reasons students can be referred to an AEDY Program. They are:

(1) Disregard for school authority, including persistent violation of school policy and rules
(2) Display or use of controlled substances on school property or during school activities
(3) Violent or threatening behavior on school property or during school-affiliate activities
(4) Possession of a weapon on school property, as defined under 18 Pa. C.S. §912
(5) Commission of a criminal act on school property or during school-affiliated activities
(6) Misconduct that would merit suspension or expulsion under school policy
(7) Habitual truancy.

Participants were asked to identify the predominant reasons for which students are currently referred to alternative education settings. No participants directly mentioned disregard for school authority, however, Terry, a district administrator, did discuss "repeated disruptive behavior" which falls under the category of persistent violations and/or general misconduct. Beth also added that these behaviors are "typically very high-level, egregious behaviors." Kelly noted referrals "based on multiple disciplinary infractions" as did Ed who shared that "at this point, most referrals are behavioral. Repeated behavioral concerns."

Display of controlled substances and weapons offenses were mentioned by Ian who shared that "in my time at the High School, it has been drug and weapon referrals." Kate also indicated that the reason she "hears about most often is drugs and alcohol."

The final responses that include AEDY allowable reasons for referral were all centered on truancy. Kevin shared that truancy is "really a major concern of ours right now" and that as a school, they are "just trying to figure out how to get these students to come to school." Don and Luke both said "truancy" and "kids not coming to school." Fran shared that "Truancy is one of the biggest reasons" but added that she believes truant students "have underlying issues that are causing them not to come to school." A review of the records during the document analysis portion of this research showed that nearly 80% of the referrals were for truancy or repeated disciplinary infractions, which is inline with these responses.

Both of these factors likely have root causes that precipitate these behaviors, however further study would need to be conducted to work with truant students, for

example, to determine the reasons why they are not attending and to see if placement in the alternative programs is a viable solution for them.

Responses that do not fall into one of the seven categories

Four participants shared top referral reasons that are not inline with the guidelines presented for AEDY referrals. Megan says the most common reason is "for credit recovery. Particularly for students who are overage and under-credited" and that it is used as "a way to help them reach graduation." Neal also discussed "academic reasons" as why the district sends kids most often, but also acknowledged "I know that isn't one" referring to it not being an allowable reason for placement. Kate also mentioned the idea of placing students who "aren't going to graduate" so that "they still have a chance to graduate" indicating that the placement was likely for credit recovery reasons in her opinion.

With a number of key individuals lacking the understanding of both the intent and compliance pieces of the AEDY referral process, it is perhaps not surprising that there were responses by those same individuals that indicated referral for reasons other than those that are accepted by the state. The most frequently cited response in this category was placement for academic concerns and credit recovery. As stated by one participant, this is "not an allowable reason to refer students" so one is left to wonder how the forms are completed and what other behaviors are being cited in order to allow students to be moved for credit recovery reasons.

Paige discussed the "rise in the need to refer students for significant mental health issues that our setting can't address" but acknowledged the difficulty in these placements

saying, " Many of them may not fit the AEDY profile" but adding, "it's clear they need a different setting."

Although not in line with appropriate reasons for AEDY referrals, the focus on academic need is not surprising based on the results of subtheme 1.1, the concept for risk, which clearly showed school administrators labeling students as at-risk for academic difficulties and not graduating with their cohorts. The overwhelming concern for students academically, mixed with a lack of settings that focus on academic support, likely creates a void for administrators and in turn, the students who need support.

Subtheme 3.2: Inhibitors to placement

Participants were also asked to share their perceptions of factors that inhibit placement of students in AEDY programs. Through questioning and conversation, fourteen participants discussed inhibitors to student placement, falling into one of three categories: budget constraints, the AEDY referral process, and missing settings.

Budget constraints

Participants identified fiscal responsibility and budgeting as an inhibitor to student placement. Responses that listed financial reasons as inhibitors for placement showed a perception that students couldn't be placed, even if it is deemed necessary, due to economic constraints. Responses included placing students into commonly used (and likely less expensive) settings, even if it was not the best fit for the student. Placing a

student in a setting that is already unlikely to meet his needs is less than ideal and should be a concern for the district if it is happening regularly.

Beth shared that she believes that, "unfortunately, due to economic constraints, we have really limited our options for these students" continuing that she believes "too many decisions are made right now for economic purposes and that's the truth. If we were solely making decisions based on what is best for the kid we would have more students getting [the] services they need." Brad named "budget constraints" as the inhibitor that "keeps educational placement options at a minimum" as did Ed who thinks, "school districts don't have the money they used to" creating a situation where "there's really a much more limited opportunity for those students."

Paige shared her struggle with inhibitors, stating, "It's really hard to know about placements because of the financial piece." She continued, "It's just not even an option for us to look at placements because we know it won't be paid for." She also acknowledged the disconnect between her expertise and what's available when she said, "Do I know what placements would be best for kids? Sure I do. But we're really scared to suggest anything because of the cost factor."

Mary indicated that we "always have to look at our local AEDY settings first" but acknowledged that "what we have available is not always a good fit for students but we choose it because the other settings are out of our reach financially." This concern was shared by Tom, a classroom teacher, who said, "What scares me the most is that money is always such a huge consideration. It worries me that we identify students who need help but then we realize we aren't going to pay for it. Students have significant

mental health issues and they go to treatment but their insurance runs out in 3 days and they are back in our buildings. How do we put a price on getting them the help they need? Unfortunately, I don't think everyone sees the investment in the kid so they can live productive, meaningful and happy lives. They just see it as a drain on finances."

AEDY referral process

Some participants listed the actual AEDY referral process and form as the top inhibitor to placement. For some, such as Liz, it seems as though "the process makes it so the student's needs don't matter. Their wants don't matter." Ian shared his belief that "the obstacles to placement are higher than they need to be" and that "sometimes we have a kid who isn't going to be successful but we force them into a mold because of the steps in the referral process." Kevin agreed, sharing that "there's definitely some frustration with the process itself" as well as with "a lack of communication" once students are placed. Brad acknowledges, "fewer placements exist than they did in the past" but shared that he thinks that is "primarily because of the structures of the AEDY referrals and that process."

A frustration with the process is understandable as several key educators indicated that they are unfamiliar with the process or that they see it as an inhibitor to student placement. However, it is important to determine which of these two factors is the case before moving forward with recommendations for this section. If a lack of understanding of the process is causing concern and appears to inhibit the ability to place a student who meets the criteria for placement, implementing clear procedures and ensuring all stakeholders are apprised of the process could clear these concerns up. However, if the

frustration with the process is an inability to place students because they do not meet the criteria, the referral process is actually working and it is the educator who does not understand the intent of the multi-step process. In other words, in this case the referral form is doing exactly what it intends to do – ensure schools have made every possible effort to educate students in the home school setting prior to referring a student who displays one of the reasons for referral.

Lack of Settings

Four interviewees noted the lack of available and appropriate settings as a concern related to placement of students in AEDY programs. A lack of trusted settings as well as distance to appropriate settings were noted as inhibitors. Perhaps most importantly, as described above as an inhibitor, not feeling comfortable with the one-sized fits all alternative setting is mentioned. It appears as though perceptions of this commonly used AEDY setting are such that those who responded feel sending all students regardless of need to the same setting just creates another setting in which students will not have their unique needs met.

Terry shared that "there are really only two AEDY settings we are comfortable using" in the district and that she personally is "not comfortable with the level of success seen in the current program used for disciplinary reasons." Fran noted a lack of local settings saying that she "doesn't think there are enough different types of settings, especially out this way. We just don't have a lot of choices." Kate agreed, saying, "We have some areas we're missing. Some groups of kids that we aren't getting to within our setting, but maybe they aren't qualified for an alternative location." Luke further defined

these missing settings as those where we can "send our kids who have specific needs. Like drug and alcohol or mental health" saying that, to him, "it doesn't make sense to send them all to the same setting for very different reasons."

Subtheme 3.3: Missing settings

In line with the responses above regarding the lack of available settings as an inhibitor to placing students alternatively, several participants' responses indicated a need for additional supports, process, and placements for students identified as at-risk. In an effort to learn more about the available settings and prevention of drop-out as outlined in proposition three, as well as the disparity among available settings and student needs in proposition four, participants were asked to share their perceptions surrounding missing supports, programs, or settings for at-risk youth. Responses fell into two categories, those that were interested in creating a strong in-house alternative program that would allow students to receive the supports they need without having to leave the district, and non-AEDY placements to meet the needs of students with significant mental health concerns.

The response by Mary was the only response to this question that did not directly discuss in-house placements or mental health concerns. In discussing the need for different settings, Mary noted that there is a disconnect between the academic programming at available AEDY placements and that of the programming received by students in the traditional setting, saying that she believed "the setting that is definitely missing is a good setting for a student who is highly capable academically, but highly troubled emotionally and behaviorally" and that "we definitely do not have a good setting

for a student like that. The placements may address the behaviors, but they serious lack in the academic offerings."

In-house Alternatives

Highlighted in the document review portion of this research, as well as from experience in the researcher's prior role, it should be noted that the district did adopt an in-house alternative program several years ago, which operated separately from the High School but within the same building. All of those who responded in favor of in-house alternative programs were district employees at the time of this program's tenure and reference the need for a similar setting once again. Says Beth, "We had a great opportunity a few years ago when we started our own program. The referral process was more lenient, but we knew who needed to go there. And we helped a lot of kids – I know we did. We need something like that again. A way to keep them in our building, show them they are still our students, and that we want to help."

Brad shared his belief that "there is really a need to try to serve our at-risk students in our schools" adding that he would like to see "an alternative program within the traditional setting" because previously "it worked for a lot of our kids." Paige also highlighted the need for "an actual, physical space for them to be" saying that "we can't just put them in a tiny closet all day" and that "we need more emotional support services for them" because she does not think most kids "have a safe spot." She acknowledged, "some students may feel comfortable with a counselor" but wondered "if we are not here or we're busy, then what?" She continued with her "ideal vision" for an "in-district setting where there would be rooms for kids to go to for small group academics, to get

therapy, to build relationships" adding that "we really started to build this a few years ago and we just didn't give it a chance due to the cost." Kate also mentioned the need for "small groups" and "relationship building" in her response, noting the importance of finding "a way for them to get support within our school on a regular basis." Don agreed, adding, "I'd love to see a model where we serve our students needs in the building."

Mental Health Placements

The second category of responses within this subtheme outlined the need for a mental health specific setting for students who do not meet AEDY criteria but for whom successful school completion, as well as future success in life, may depend on intensive intervention and support. Individuals noted a lack of settings such as this as an inhibitor, as well as the rise of mental health concerns they are seeing. Bob noted that "the mental health component is something we just don't have" and that "we are disconnected from the mental health component. We see it more and more but we still have this mental health stigma going on and we're not doing anything about it. We're all just sort of sitting quietly hoping a counselor can deal with it, but we're not connecting at all how we could help the situation." Terry shared similar concerns with the "need for settings that deal with the therapeutic component" where "students can actually learn and thrive and grow because they're getting counseling all day, every day." She stressed the importance of this therapy being "clinical counseling, not superficial" emphasizing, "we need more of that and at a younger age."

Liz noted the frustration with needing a setting that "addresses social and emotional needs" but acknowledged, "It's not really something you can refer a student to

AEDY for." She continued, "It's really hard to find a specific program that has as many therapeutic resources as we need for the mental health concerns." Ed echoed those concerns saying that for him, "it's students who are coming with greater needs from a mental health perspective; we can't address their needs in our setting." Fran discussed the fact that "we have rehab for the kids that have drug and alcohol problems" and that "we have alternative placements for behavioral problems" but that "there needs to be more settings that address mental health issues" because in her opinion, "those problems don't get addressed."

Theme Three Summary

Theme three focused on the relationship between the at-risk students and the school settings. The data collected aimed to determine how the perceptions of key educators affect the education of at-risk youth and the choice to place them alternatively. In practice, it appears that a lack of understanding of the process, as well as an administrator focus on academics, may be playing into the decision to place students in AEDY settings for credit recovery reasons. Additionally, this theme highlighted the inhibitors to placement for students who are identified as needing additional support, including budget concerns and a lack of appropriate settings. Finally, participants shared their requests for the reinstitution of an in-house alternative program and for a non-AEDY mental health setting.

Summary

The responses to interview questions by each participant group (District Administrator, School Administrator, Guidance Counselor, and Classroom Teacher) were analyzed, coded, and sorted into three themes, People, Placement, and Process. Once identified, these themes were further refined into subthemes and categories were added where appropriate under each subtheme. Subthemes with regard to Theme One: People included the concept of an at-risk youth (including academic and social risk factors), perceptions surrounding why students drop out of school prior to completion (including push and pull effects), and the role educators play, or should play, in the lives of our at-risk youth (including district office personnel, building administrators, guidance counselors, and classroom teachers).

Identified subthemes with regard to Theme Two: Placement included the idea of an alternative placement as something different from the traditional school setting and designed to meet student needs, perceptions surrounding educator's levels of familiarity with the AEDY referral process, and finally the factors that are considered when making the decision to place a student alternatively (including student needs and building needs).

Identified subthemes within Theme Three: Practice (a synthesis of people and placement) include educator perception surrounding the most common reasons for referral (whether or not they meet the identified criteria), factors that inhibit placement of students (including budget, referral process, and available settings), and finally a collection of the responses regarding the types of programs and settings that are necessary to meet the needs of our student but which are not currently available.

The study's research questions sought to discover how educators perceive both alternative education and at-risk youth, to what extent they understand AEDY, and to outline the factors that play a role in student placement. With regard to administrator perceptions of alternative education, Theme 2 highlighted the lack of a common vision and discrepancy with definitions of terms among participants. Comparisons between "traditional" and "alternative" settings provided insight into the participants feelings on alternative schools as places designed to meet the needs of students in ways that the traditional setting is unable, but also, for the most part, as places reserved for students who do not conform to the rules or who are disruptive.

Theme One directly addressed the participant perceptions of at-risk youth, focusing on the characteristics of students deemed to be at-risk as well as on the role school employees play in their lives. While the concept of being at-risk meant different things to different people, it could generally be separated into academic or social risk. Administrator perceptions tended to focus on academic risk, while guidance counselors focused on social needs. Participants identified both push and pull effects when describing their perceptions surrounding student drop out, however these did not align with the role individuals played in the students' lives. As an example, connections with teachers and staff were repeatedly noted as an essential element of successful work with at-risk youth. However, classroom teachers did not note this as central to their current roles.

The subquestion aimed to determine the extent to which administrators understood the intent and compliance pieces of the AEDY referral process. Subtheme 2.2 directly addressed this question, presenting information that highlighted the lack of

knowledge of the process by key administrators charged with placement of students. Additionally, the findings showed a lack of connection between the classroom teachers and the referral process, further separating the teacher's connection to at-risk youth and available supports.

The final subquestion looked at the factors considered by administrators when considering alternative placement and was addressed through Theme Three, which looked at the current practices of PRSD. While a number of participants highlighted the need to refer to the process prior to considering placement, at least some administrators shared that they placed students for reasons other than those that are approved by the Commonwealth. Administrators were more likely to look at the needs of the building as a factor for student placement while counselors were more likely to consider the needs of the individual student. The findings also support the perception of a lack of appropriate, local, cost-effective solutions for struggling students and also supported the reinstitution of an in-house alternative program. Additionally, the findings highlighted concerns over the balance between meeting student needs and fiscal responsibility.

A review of these findings with regard to the literature and the propositions, implications for PRSD, and implications for future study are discussed in Chapter 5.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Introduction

With studies showing that a high school dropout will earn approximately $300,000 less than a graduate, and nearly one million less than a peer with a post-secondary degree over their working lives (Lehr et al., 2005), and that high school dropouts are linked to increased health risks, welfare participation, habitual unemployment, crime involvement and time in prison (Harlow, 2003; Sanchez & Wertheimer, 2011; The Alliance, 2013), successful attainment of a high school diploma proves to be essential in today's society.

Little research has been done on the alternative program perceptions of district administrators prompting this study which aimed to discover the perceptions of alternative programs, specifically those labeled as Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY) placements, by school officials charged with making the decision to place students outside of the traditional school setting in an effort to determine how decisions are currently made in the Park Run School District (PRSD) and what needs district employees may have in supporting at-risk youth.

In an effort to determine the role, if any, educator perceptions play in student placement, this research addressed the following question and subquestions.

How do educators perceive Alternative Education and At-risk Youth?

a. To what extent do educators understand AEDY? (Intent and compliance)
b. What other factors (i.e. budget, location) play a role in student placement?

Review of the literature

The review of available literature for this study provided information on public education, alternative education and at-risk youth. With regard to the issues currently facing public education, the funding formula (and associated inequities) and concerns about high school dropouts topped were most often discussed. It became increasingly evident that while studies such as the one completed by Lehr et al. (2005) addressed the reasons why students made the decision to leave school early, further research was needed to determine if the school setting itself could be, at least in part, responsible for pushing students away from school. The study further sought to highlight the perceptions of school administrators and key educators with regard to student drop out.

Historical information as presented with regard to the rise of alternative schooling and the different forms it has taken over the past two hundred years. The view of alternative schools presented in the 1980s and 1990's, which focused on students who were unengaged in the learning process, proved to be similar to that of PRSDs current

model for students placed in a local AEDY setting in that it focuses on core-curricular study and often ties to participation in the local CTC. Based on the responses to the interview questions, however, it does not exist to increase student achievement, engagement, or retention. It instead presents a program that emotes a negative connotation, focusing on students who have been labeled as having significant behavioral problems. With the majority of participants being unable to differentiate between alternative education as a whole and AEDY, it is clear that the district lacks a standard definition for alternative education and for AEDY, potentially leading to the confusion about the terms, the placements, and the process of referring students to outplacement. This finding, while likely not generalizable, presents important information for key officials in the PRSD as they develop a vision and definition for what Alternative Education looks like in the district.

The literature review also sought information regarding AEDY specific programs as a whole. While not the focus of this study, the literature review also highlighted the lack of available information surrounding AEDY funding and expenditures, existing programs, and likelihood of student success. The literature did highlight the importance of rehabilitating students with a goal of returning students to the home school, what Raywid considers Type III settings (1994). Responses from several interviewees were generally in line with this idea, making comments specific to the importance of students returning to the traditional setting. Unfortunately, the data gathered through the document review and subsequent interviews showed a disconnect between the idea of returning students and the current practice. Currently, less than 10% of students return to

the regular setting after being outplaced, compared to the state issued minimum goal of 20%. Further research is needed to determine why this goal is not being met.

The remainder of the literature review focused on the characteristics of at-risk youth and the reasons why youth disengage from school and ultimately choose to leave school prior to completion. The data related to risk gathered through this study parallels the work of Lee and Burkam (2003) in that it can be easily separated into two types of risk, academic and social. School administrators overwhelmingly focused on academic risk factors and the need for students to graduate on time, with their cohort. Counselors and teachers, conversely, focused on social risk, or a combination of both, as the factors most likely to lead to disengagement. In both cases, the focus remained more on the student than on the school itself.

As suggested by the literature, "the process of disengaging from school begins well before they arrive at the moment when they leave school" (Lee & Burkam, 2003, p. 357). It is a cumulative process which may begin as early as first grade (Alexander et al., 1997) and differs from the actual moment when they decide to leave school. The research study responses once again parallel the literature in that they can be separated into "push and pull" effects (Jordan et al., 1999; Lehr et al., 2005) and, at least for those who selected push effects, reflect an understanding that the school setting may play a role in a students disengagement. In fact, ten of the interviewees stated that they believed the chief reason for dropouts was related to the school setting itself, including the structure, work, and lack of relationships with the staff or the school itself. However, none addressed what is being done, if anything, to remedy this.

Review of the Propositions

Prior to beginning the data collection and analysis process, four propositions were offered to help guide the study. These propositions were created based on a wisdom of practice or what was thought to be true due to experience, but which lacked research-based data from existing literature. These propositions are revisited below, including new information, when available, gathered through this study.

The first proposition asserted that a focus on the school setting itself, not only on student characteristics, could aid in determining the potential success of an at-risk student in an alternative setting. As described above, administrator perceptions showed a belief that the school setting does not work for some students. They also acknowledged in the discussion of alternative settings, that many of the traditional setting inhibitors (large class sizes, no personal attention, a focus on academics only, and no connection to school personnel) are directly addressed by many alternative settings (smaller class sizes, smaller teacher-student ratio, focus on counseling and academics). This supports the suggestion that if a student is disengaged due to the school setting, the alternative setting may allow that student to reengage and successfully complete school. It also suggests that if the alternative setting is working for that student, administrators may be reluctant to pull the student back to the traditional setting, perhaps accounting for the small percentage of students returning. The introduction of an in-house alternative could potentially create an environment that matches both the needs of the administration (academic focus, not just behavioral) as well as the needs of the student (smaller setting with lower student-teacher ratio).

The second proposition focused on the possibility that some key decision makers do not have adequate knowledge of, or experience with, AEDY programs to fully understand the purpose, benefits/drawbacks to students, and/or the referral process. Again, research findings directly support this proposition, with only three school administrators and two counselors showing a solid understanding of the intent and/or process of the referral. The BEC clearly outlines the allowable reasons for referral and the Commonwealth has created a thorough referral process to ensure the required interventions have been attempted prior to referral. However, in PRSD, it is clear that several administrators do not have an understanding of the required steps and that at least some administrators and counselors believe it is allowable to place students in AEDY settings for credit recovery reasons. In addition, the data collected with regard to the factors considered prior to placement show most administrators focusing on the process itself or on the needs of the building, adding to the support for the likelihood that there is a lack of focus regarding the benefits and drawbacks of alternative placement on potential students.

The third proposition sought to determine if there is a direct link between opportunities for alternative education (or lack thereof) and the prevention of at-risk youth dropping out. Interviewees were asked about opportunities for at-risk youth and shared several inhibitors to placement, including budget constraints, the referral process itself, and a lack of settings. As mentioned in the literature review, specific information regarding funding for alternative schools is limited at best. While specific budgetary information was not available for PRSD, a number of participants identified budgeting as a major inhibitor to student placement, with four participants stating that students have

dropped out due to a lack of available alternative programming. As a final interview question, participants were asked if they believed that alternative education placement is a viable option for youth that have disengaged to the point of dropping out. Eighteen participants indicated that they believed a change in placement could be enough to stop a student from dropping out, yet only four participants thought it would be possible to place a student in this situation, indicating that, in PRSD, there is a disconnect between the need for alternative placement and the perceived opportunities for placement. Participants also highlighted the lack of available settings, particularly in PRSD's geographic area, further solidifying the concern that there is a lack of opportunities for appropriate placement of students in need.

The fourth proposition asserted that it is possible that there is a mismatch between available programs and student need. In line with the lack of settings described above, this proposition delves deeper into the types of settings that are missing, according to those who participated in this study. Overwhelmingly, participants identified the need for a mental health focused school setting. Counselors and administrators highlighted the rise in mental health concerns and voiced frustration with the lack of appropriate settings available to address these significant student needs. Additionally, this brought to light a concern over the need for non-AEDY settings, as many of these students do not exhibit the behaviors associated with AEDY referral, making current placement opportunities even more limited. Six participants also shared their desire for an in-house alternative program, similar to the one adopted by the district several years ago and recently abandoned. These participants identified the lack of an appropriate academic setting within the traditional setting that addresses the needs of students who struggle with

school but do not necessarily demonstrate egregiously inappropriate behaviors as a result. The in-house alternative setting has the potential to serve a large number of students without the need for costly outplacement and while maintaining district control over content and service delivery.

Implications for Practice

The intent of the study was to provide recommendations to leaders within the Park Run School district. The six recommendations included in this section are specific to PRSD, however many of the findings may prove useful to individuals outside of the district. The data collected and analyzed from this study represent only a small portion of the research that would be necessary to generalize the findings beyond PRSD.

First, the district must clearly outline the difference between alternative education and AEDY. Overwhelmingly, responses treated these two terms as one in the same, demonstrating that these individuals view alternative education placements as reserved for disruptive youth. While this information did not directly provide answers to the research question or propositions, it did allow me to surmise that the district needs to do a better job of educating it's staff regarding the types of alternative education available as well as the differences between schools of choice and involuntary programs such as AEDY. Particularly with the stated rise in mental health concerns, a shift in the need for non-AEDY placements is necessary to serve these students. Without an understanding of the different types of Alternative Education settings, it will be difficult to educate individuals on the possibility of alternative education for non-behavioral reasons.

Second, PDE has established a clear procedure for school districts with regard to AEDY student placements. It is recommended that PRSD establish a practice by which all administrators, counselors, and other identified personnel are made aware of this process. A clear policy with regard to AEDY placements will ensure that staff understand both the intent and compliance pieces of the referral process, and will also allow for reiteration of the appropriate reasons for referral. Employees need to be aware that the process is designed to ensure that districts have made every effort to provide interventions and accommodations that will allow the student to stay in the home school. Additionally, they should be told that the process outlines allowable reasons for referral in an effort to ensure students are placed for appropriate reasons. It will be important to share this process with all staff involved in student placements to ensure consistency.

Third, the role of the guidance counselor should be revisited and refined. There is a disconnect between what the administrators view the counselors job responsibilities with regard to at-risk youth to be and what the counselors' believe they are able to accomplish. It is clear that all parties believe the counselor to be an advocate for students; however, it is necessary to review the structure of the counselor's job responsibilities to ensure they have the maximum amount of time available with students and are not routinely pulled to do tasks that are not student related. Developing a model where all stakeholders have a better understanding of the role of the counselor will ensure that the revised position allows counselors to make the necessary connections with the youth they serve.

Fourth, building level administrators must more clearly articulate their vision for the role of classroom teachers in working with at-risk youth. The analysis of the findings

discussed the disconnect between administrators and teachers with regard to the role of the teacher in both disengagement (push vs. pull effects) from school and in working with at-risk youth (teaching content vs. teaching kids). The expectation should be that teachers are making connections with all students and referring those about whom they have concerns to the counselors or administrators if it is warranted. This finding was particularly important given that the teachers chosen to participate in this study were selected based on their participation with the SAP team and their perceived work with at-risk youth. Given that these responses did not show an understanding of the importance of relationship building and/or the role of the school setting in a student's decision to leave school, there is now a greater concern with regard to the feelings of the general teaching population in these areas.

This finding provides the district with an opportunity to highlight the beliefs and practices of the different stakeholder groups with regard to working with at-risk youth. In particular, the concept of positionality plays an important role in this discussion. Positionality is in essence a person's specific place or role in a given situation. As described by Gross, "it is important to understand the relative situation of individuals in the organization in a multidimensional fashion" (2012, p. 253). It is imperative that each stakeholder have a clear understanding of their own positionality and how it affects the decisions that they make. As stated above, it is recommended that the administrators develop a vision for the role teachers, counselors, and administrators play in the lives of at-risk youth. However, it is perhaps equally important that each individual attempt to be empathetic towards the other stakeholder groups during this process. In general, it may be acceptable for a building principal to prioritize the needs of the building over an

individual student, based on that individual's roles and responsibilities. It is important, however, that he/she be able to ensure that another individual, perhaps the guidance counselor, will be advocating for the child (again, based on the counselor's roles and responsibilities). To ensure the balance, the vision setting recommended here must allow for all stakeholders to explore their own positionality as well as the positionality of those with which they work. This open discussion will help to form the guiding principles for the district moving forward.

Fifth, the findings presented a "factory model" of education that was repeatedly referred to as "traditional." Participants reiterated their belief that the "typical" setting did not work for many students; however, there was no mention of a plan, or a desire, to change this. A deeper look at the district's vision for instructional practices for all students is warranted. It is possible, and perhaps likely, that changes made to the structure of the school day, expectations of what daily instruction should look like, and the inclusion of a more personalized learning model would benefit all students, not just those deemed at-risk.

Sixth, it is recommended that the district look at the amount spent per student in AEDY placements to determine if the perception that money is not available is accurate or incorrect. Additionally, it is important to look at the cost of the most frequently used AEDY placement (which several individuals noted to be sub-par) to determine if those program funds could be reallocated to a different program (or potentially the newly created in-house program) that would be more in line with the districts vision for alternative education students.

Implications for Future Research

Quality information pertaining to the role of resiliency factors and grit were not attained through this research. It is recommended that a future study work directly with students who were labeled as at-risk, but who reached graduation without alternative placement in an effort to determine the factors that allowed them to be successful. While part of the original conceptual framework, the data did not support any findings.

A study similar to this one, but which focuses on the student perspective, could prove beneficial in the pursuit of data related to student disengagement from school as well as experiences in traditional and alternative school settings. Additional research should also be considered surrounding the most common reasons for student referrals to alternative placements. It is suggested that future research look for the root cause of the referral, not the referral reason itself. As discussed in the findings, while a student may be ultimately referred for truancy, they may have stopped attending for a variety of reasons. Having a better understanding of the root causes will allow school officials, counselors, and teachers to provide targeted interventions to students sooner.

Finally, it is suggested that further research be done to see if there a correlation between negative school climate and AEDY referrals. The presence of a positive correlation would verify that there is a link between the way students feel about their connection to school and the likelihood that they will be removed from the school setting at some point and placed in alternative education.

Summary

Ensuring the academic, social, and emotional welfare of all students is essential. The purpose of this study was to identify areas of both strength and concern with regard to the PRSD and its connection to at-risk youth and alternative education. Focusing on perceptions allowed me the opportunity to gain insight into the way in which key individuals view alternative education and at-risk youth. While the process and experience of data collection was generally positive, the lack of connection to at-risk youth by several participants was disheartening.

While not an original focus of the study, I learned a great deal about the disconnect between both the perceptions and expectations of administrators, counselors, and teachers. This work affirmed the need to create a clear vision for educating at-risk youth as well as the need to work on an alignment between the levels. The data collected through this study will provide relevant information to PRSD as the district moves forward with plans to address the needs of all students.

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APPENDIX A: MAP OF PROPOSITIONS TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS	
Research question	Proposition
How do educators perceive Alternative Education and At-risk Youth?	1. A focus on the school setting itself, not only on student characteristics, could aid in determining the potential success of an at-risk student in an alternative setting.
To what extent do educators understand AEDY? (Intent and compliance)	2. It is possible that some key decision makers do not have adequate knowledge of, or experience with, AEDY programs to fully understand the purpose, benefits/drawbacks to students, and/or the referral process.
What other factors (i.e. budget, location) play a role in student placement?	3. It is possible that it is necessary for students to possess resiliency factors or grit in order to overcome barriers to successful school completion.
What other factors (i.e. budget, location) play a role in student placement?	4. It is possible that there is a direct link between opportunities for alternative education (or lack thereof) and the prevention of at-risk youth dropping out.
What other factors (i.e. budget, location) play a role in student placement?	5. It is possible that there is a mismatch between available programs and student need.

APPENDIX B: MAP OF INTERVIEW QUESTIONS TO RESEARCH QUESTIONS	
Research Question	Survey Question
How do educators perceive Alternative Education and At-risk Youth?	2. Please provide a working definition of: a. Alternative Education b. AEDY c. At-risk youth 7. What role do you believe the following people play in assisting at-risk youth? a. District Office b. Building principals c. Guidance counselors d. Classroom teachers 8. What do you believe to be the biggest factor in a student's decision to leave school?
To what extent do educators understand AEDY? (Intent and compliance)	3. Describe your understanding of the steps in the referral process to AEDY settings. 9. What strategies do you employ when working with at risk youth?
What other factors (i.e. budget, location) play a role in student placement?	4. What factors do you consider when referring to an AEDY setting? 5. For what reasons are students currently referred most often? 6. Do you believe adequate opportunities for placement exist to meet student needs? 10. Once a student has made the decision to leave school, do you see alternative placements as a viable option?

APPENDIX C: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Interview preamble:

- Thank interviewee
- Restate purpose of interview and of the study
- Remind interviewee that the interview is being recorded
- Remind participants that the data will be anonymized
- Remind interviewee that this is a conversation and that they can seek clarification to any questions
- Remind interviewee that the interview is scheduled for 30 minutes
- Remind interviewee that I will contact them after the interview to conduct a member check to ensure accurate answers and to provide additional opportunities for clarification
- While recording, state the date, time, location, and name and title of the interviewee

Interview questions:

Introduction

1. Please share a little about yourself.

    a. What is your current position?
    b. Years in position
    c. Prior experience

2. I am looking at alternative education and I am interested in how educators define or understand terms. I will give you a list of terms; can you please provide me with a working definition and example of each?

    a. Alternative Education
    b. Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY)
    c. At-risk youth

Alternative Placement

3. Describe your understanding of the steps in the referral process to AEDY settings.

4. What factors do you consider when referring to an AEDY setting? Can you give an example?

5. For what reasons are students currently referred to an AEDY setting most often?

6. Do you believe adequate opportunities for placement exist to meet student needs?

a. If yes, how do you know?

b. If no, what is missing?

At-risk youth

7. What role do you believe the following people play in assisting at-risk youth?

a. District office personnel
b. Building principals
c. The guidance counselor
d. Classroom teachers

Drop out

8. What do you believe to be the biggest factor in a student's decision to leave school prior to completion?

9. What strategies do you employ when working with at-risk youth who are considering leaving school?

10. Once a student has made the decision to leave school, do you see alternative placement as a viable option? Why or why not?

APPENDIX D: PARTICIPANT PROFILE

Pseudonym	Gender	Experience (in years)	Current Position
Bob	Male	18	District Administrator
Carl	Male	20	District Administrator
Terry	Female	31	District Administrator
Kelly	Female	26	District Administrator
Liz	Female	6	School Administrator
Megan	Female	10	School Administrator
Ian	Male	5	School Administrator
Kevin	Male	18	School Administrator
Grace	Female	13	School Administrator
Beth	Female	29	School Administrator
Mary	Female	22	School Administrator
Neal	Male	11	School Administrator
Ed	Male	31	Guidance Counselor
Fran	Female	8	Guidance Counselor
Paige	Female	15	Guidance Counselor
Neal	Male	21	Guidance Counselor
Kate	Female	8	Classroom Teacher
Don	Male	15	Classroom Teacher
Luke	Male	19	Classroom Teacher
Ellen	Female	20	Classroom Teacher
Tom	Male	6	Classroom Teacher
Sarah	Female	5	Classroom Teacher

APPENDIX E: FIVE-YEAR DATA ON AEDY PLACEMENTS

Data included in this chart show the number of students (male and female) who were enrolled in the AEDY setting for a full or partial year. Students who graduated during the given year, left school prior to completion (dropped out), were detained by the police, or who returned to the PRSD are shown in the table. Students who did not fall into one of those four categories were still enrolled in the AEDY setting at the close of the school year and should have returned to the setting the following year.

		Total	Graduated	Dropped Out	Detained	Returned to PRSD
2010-2011	Male	28	6	6	2	3
	Female	13		3		1
2011-2012	Male	22	2	6		2
	Female	6	1			1
2012-2013	Male	18	1	3	2	2
	Female	6	2	2		
2013-2014	Male	25	8	4	1	3
	Female	13	4	4		1
2014-2015*	Male	23 *		1 *		
	Female	10 *				1 *

*End of year data for 2014-2015 was not available at the time of this study, mid-year data was used.

APPENDIX F: INTERVIEW PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

TEMPLE UNIVERSITY
RESEARCH SUBJECT INFORMATION FORM

Research Title:

Alternative Education: Administrator Perceptions of Alternative Education and At-risk Youth

This study is being conducted as the dissertation component of a doctorate in educational leadership by:

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You are being invited to participate in a research study. Before you agree, the investigator must explain a number of considerations to you. These include:

- This study will explore the perceptions of alternative programs, specifically those labeled as Alternative Education for Disruptive Youth (AEDY) placements, by school officials charged with making the decision to place students outside of the traditional school setting. The study will gather data on district decisions surrounding placement of students in alternative settings, the most common reasons for referral to AEDY placement, availability of appropriate programs locally, and the school officials' perceptions of alternative education and at-risk students. This work may also inform future, additional studies in the area of Alternative education.
- This study is qualitative and non-experimental. There are no health-related risks or considerations.
- The investigator will survey and conduct interviews and focus groups with district level administrators, building level administrators, guidance counselors, and support professionals beginning in the Fall of 2014 and concluding in the beginning of 2015.
- Interviews and focus groups may be recorded and transcribed using a confidential third party service.
- The investigator may conduct follow up conversations with you to verify the accuracy of your participation.
- The study will be available as a dissertation in the public domain upon completion as well as through related works published in academic journal publications and/or presented at conferences.
- Your involvement in the study will be anonymized and your confidential information will be protected on password-protected computers and electronic databases.
- There is no cost to you to participate in this study, nor will there be any benefits or related compensation provided to you for your participation. Your participation in this research study is voluntary. If you decide not to participate, you are free to leave the study at anytime. If you are an employee of the Quakertown Community School District, participation (or non-participation) in this study will in no way negatively impact your performance evaluation and/or employment.

If you have questions about your participation in this research study or about your rights as a research subject, make sure to discuss them with the investigator, Lisa Hoffman, using the contact information listed above.

You are asked to sign this form to show that:

- the research study and the information above have been discussed with you and that
- you agree to participate in the study.

You will receive a copy of this signed form and the summary of the study that will be discussed with you.

Subject's Name **[print]**	Subject's Signature	Date
Witness **[print]**	Witness' Signature	Date