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PERCEPTIONS OF ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL TEACHERS AND

ADMINISTRATORS ABOUT THE IMPACT OF THE

NO CHILD LEFT BEHIND ACT

A Dissertation in

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by

Carla Glover Queenan

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The dissertation of Carla Glover Queenan was reviewed and approved* by the following:

Nona A. Prestine
Professor of Educational Leadership
Dissertation Advisor
Committee Chair

Preston C. Green
Professor of Educational Leadership and Law

Jacqueline A. Stefkovich
Professor of Educational Leadership

Edgar P. Yoder
Professor of Agricultural and Extension Education

William T. Hartman
Professor of Educational Leadership
Professor in Charge, Educational Leadership

*Signatures are on file in the Graduate School

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate and examine the perceptions of alternative school teachers and administrators about the impact of No Child Left Behind on their students and school. Through the lens of alternative school practitioners, this study examined the intersection of at-risk students, alternative education programs, and NCLB. The findings provide valuable insights into the struggles of alternative schools and teachers as they grapple with the reality of No Child Left Behind and what it means for students at-risk and alternative education programs. The results yielded several conclusions which related to the reviewed research. Recommendations can be made for alternative programs on how to maintain their viability in the era of NCLB. They include the need to achieve a balance between the academic and social-emotional aspects of education, the need for autonomy and the necessity of an integrated curriculum. Relevant recommendations gleaned from this study for legislators and other policymakers on the state and national levels include a greater familiarity with and knowledge of the characteristics of the at-risk student and the implementation of alternate performance measures for this often overlooked student population.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

In an attempt to educate all children and improve overall student performance, former President George W. Bush and Congress rewrote federal education programs and pledged to "leave no child behind." As a result, in his first year in office, the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 redefined the federal role in education. No Child Left Behind is a comprehensive reform that targets and attempts to promote educational excellence in America's public schools.

President Bush was not the first U.S. President to address the state of public education. Former President Ronald Reagan commissioned the Department of Education to examine this issue almost twenty years prior to No Child Left Behind. Published in 1983, the *A Nation at Risk* report argued that public schools need to raise their standards in educating America's youth. While urging schools to raise standards and aim for academic excellence certainly has merit, the manner in which these goals are to be carried out may be problematic for certain groups of America's students.

One of these groups is the sometimes forgotten student population considered "at-risk" for school failure or dropping out of school. The reasons why these students are "at-risk" are as diverse as the students themselves. Consequently, meeting the needs of alternative education students and the schools set up to address their needs face a daunting challenge and one likely made more complex in light of the No Child Left Behind legislation.

Like their traditional school counterparts, alternative education programs are increasingly feeling the demands of higher standards and greater accountability. Over the

past several years, as a result of No Child Left Behind, most states now require that students in alternative education programs meet the same criteria and be held to the same standards as regular education students educated in traditional schools and programs.

While I believe that the goal of educational excellence for all children is worthy and should be non-negotiable, my background as an educator for the past twenty years in an alternative school in Pennsylvania has caused me to whole-heartedly agree with Kraemer and Ruzzi (2001) who assert that attempts to raise standards for alternative education students cannot simply follow the model created for regular schools. They argue that the challenge is to ensure that alternative schools have the necessary human, organizational, and academic resources to respond to higher standards mandated by No Child Left Behind. An even more harrowing challenge is for alternative schools to respond to these standards without sacrificing or compromising their mission and structure. Finding a happy medium and striking a balance between the government's mandates and the alternative education students' needs is no easy task. Sacrificing the mission of these schools or placing their core tenets on hold for the sake of No Child Left Behind could ultimately sacrifice the education and life-chances of these students. Such sacrifices hold the potential to cause these students to once again become disinterested in and disengaged from education possibly to the extent that they make the decision to drop out of school. Too much emphasis on initiatives such as standards and PSSA test scores could sabotage the viability of these alternative programs as "at-risk" students, who often already feel that more traditional school settings have not addressed their needs, could feel equally alienated from and betrayed by the alternative schools.

To further explore the topic of alternative education and its students, I examined several recent studies. In her phenomenological study of "at-risk" students, Jarratt (2002) focused on the voice of the "at-risk" high school student in Texas and argued that this voice could help educators design programs aimed at reducing the effects of students' "at-risk" characteristics as related to their school success. Broome (2002) maintains that traditional instructional classroom settings and approaches offer impoverished learning environments for at-risk students. She believes that educators should be cognizant of all the factors that lead to the success or failure of alternative education students as well as instructional strategies that may compensate for or work in spite of the social or economic inequities they face. I concur with her conclusion that a direct and concrete relationship between the at-risk students' educational priorities and the value they attach to their learning is necessary. Kong (2002) concurs noting that increasing academic achievement for "at-risk" students has always been a struggle for educators. Her findings suggested that even a nontraditional, alternative school setting, no matter how structured or organized, may not be able to do enough to address the motivational issues among alternative school students.

On a considerably larger scale than the aforementioned studies, the *District Survey of Alternative Schools and Programs* conducted by the National Center for Education Statistics through its Fast Response Survey System (2001) was the first national study of public alternative schools and programs to provide data on topics related to the availability of public alternative schools and programs, enrollment, staffing and services. This study focused on alternative schools and programs that educate students who are "at-risk" of educational failure resulting from factors including low

grades, truancy, disruptive behavior, pregnancy or similar factors associated with dropping out of school. While presenting an exceptionally comprehensive survey of alternative schools and programs, the study was conducted before the No Child Left Behind Act took effect and thus offers little insight into the ramifications of increased standards and high-stakes testing on alternative education programs.

After years of failure in the traditional system, many alternative education students are deeply suspicious of the system's willingness to help them. One of the most significant challenges facing alternative programs and schools is how to build a fragile bond of two-way trust between students and staff. As Kraemer and Ruzzi noted, simply imposing higher standards without warning and adequate preparation could ultimately disrupt this bond and increase student skepticism, alienation, and disengagement.

Statement of the Problem

Although No Child Left Behind mandates that "all children" be held to the same standards and the same levels of accountability, there remain fundamental differences between alternative and traditional education students. A report from the National Center of Education Statistics (2001) outlined a number of the reasons why "at-risk" students are "at-risk" in the first place, such as poor grades, truancy, and behavior problems. All of these are likely to hinder these students from meeting, let alone exceeding the proficiency levels set forth in No Child Left Behind legislation.

The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of alternative school teachers and administrators about the impact of the provisions of No Child Left Behind on their schools. The study focused on the perceptions of teachers and administrators in one alternative high school in Pennsylvania. Several questions guided this study and the subsequent data analysis.

1.   What has been the impact of No Child Left Behind on alternative schools?

2.   What areas of the school do you feel have been most directly impacted or affected?

3.   From your perspective, what responses might be most appropriate to address the problems or issues arising from the impact of No Child Left Behind?

Significance of the Study

This study utilized and tapped into the expertise of alternative education practitioners in an alternative high school in Pennsylvania in an attempt to shed light on the perceived impact of No Child Left Behind. The findings of this study additionally targeted, from the perspectives of these alternative school teachers and administrators, how issues associated with No Child Left Behind might be addressed. This study gave a voice to these practitioners who had firsthand experience with "at-risk" students.

The findings presented here may provide valuable insights into and understanding of the struggles of alternative schools and teachers as they grapple

with the reality of No Child Left Behind and what it means for their students. The findings also illustrate the tenuous defenses alternative education programs are able to muster in the face of the NCLB steamroller. Most of all, the study provides an interesting view of alternative education in the era of NCLB and its possible fate.

CHAPTER TWO

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

The current research supports the assertion that the at-risk student population is diverse, has very specific needs, and is fundamentally different than the traditional student population. Research on at-risk students and alternative schools has consistently documented the importance of addressing the specific needs of these students so that they can achieve educational success (Abe, 2008, Bishop, 1989; Bower, 2008; Conley, 2002; Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; DuCloux, 2009; Dunbar, 2001; Fantini, 1976; Kronick, 1997; Manning & Baruth, 1995; Presseisen, 1988; Quinn & Poirier, 2006; Rossi, 1994; Sanders, 2000; Williamson, 2008; Young, 1990). This literature review examined research findings on the at-risk student population as well as the history of alternative education and alternative schools to provide a backdrop for the impact No Child Left Behind has on alternative education students and programs.

History of Alternative Education

Although alternative education has evolved over the years, the National Conference of State Legislatures (2009) contends it is widely accepted that alternative education serves students who are at-risk for school failure within the traditional educational system. Additionally, while the short-term goal of alternative education is to meet the needs of at-risk students, alternative education's long-term goal is to identify and implement successful strategies to improve the learning opportunities for all students. Before alternative schools came into existence, the prevailing belief was that all children learned in the same way and that one curriculum was sufficient for all. Thus, regular

education attempted to put every student in the same square box. The alternative schools movement has revealed that different people learn in different ways and that every student does not fit into the same box. The development of alternative learning environments is often based on the idea that learning experiences for students can be provided in many different ways.

Mario Fantini (1976), a noted proponent of school choice, views the alternative schools movement through a political framework. He contends that the increased federal attention schools received in the 1960s was accompanied by the assumption that the problems with education were with the learner, his family and background. In addition, new terminology, including labels such as disadvantaged, culturally deprived and disruptive, that focused solely on the learner, began to emerge. As a result, this time period gave rise to new public policies and legislation such as the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, which promoted compensatory education and offered concentrated remediation programs. Also a characteristic of education in the 1960s was innovation. New approaches such as new math, new science and team teaching emerged. Although federal monies were invested in education for remediation and innovation, the system itself was still less than adequate. Part of the problem with the approach of the 60s was that it simply labeled the learner and then tried to change him to make him fit into the school's square box even though the box looked a tad different.

Later, in the 1970s, Fantini (1976) reports an educational paradigm shift. During this period the belief was that the problem with education is not the fault of the learner, but of the institution. Therefore, the task was not one of trying to fit the learner into the school's square box, but, rather, the other way around. However, with this period came

the daunting task of constructively meeting student needs while retaining educational

soundness, economic feasibility and political viability.

Like Fantini, Brenda Edgerton Conley (2002) asserts that the alternative schools

movement can best be explained in a political context in that the value of schooling and

the focus of its delivery vary according to the demands of the time period. In relation to

alternative schools, she, like Fantini, believes that the 1960s could be considered the

period of innovation and that the 70s could be categorized as the age of accountability

and improvement. Conley takes Fantini's research a step further and delves into an

analysis of 1980 through the present. Conley (2002) chronicles the 1980s as the

beginning of the Excellence Movement. Throughout the 1980s and the 1990s, education

was a top national priority that became a major agenda item of the presidential elections

of 1984, 1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004.   The 1990s were the era of restructuring while the

twenty-first century can be categorized as the era of competition, school choice and

school reform (Conley, 2002).

Within the political frame it is extremely difficult to separate the alternative

schools movement from the school reform movement because numerous alternative

schools were created in response to school reform initiatives. However, the definitions of

the term alternative must be addressed in order to obtain a clear picture of what

alternative education means in the twenty-first century.

There are those such as Jonathan Kozol (1982) who views alternative education as

a vehicle that ensures that students' intellectual as well as psychological needs that

include values, visions and ideals are fostered.   From another perspective, Ron Miller

(1994) contends that alternative education is uniquely counter-cultural. He asserts that

alternative education replaces the assumptions and values that have monopolized Western culture for decades. Often, alternative education students view their schools as places where they are afforded more freedom, opportunities and choices than in the traditional school. Conrath (2001) believes that the ideology of alternative schools must be that it is possible for all students to succeed. He asserts that it is imperative for alternative schools to insist on being a part of a systemic intervention that involves changing the system in which students operate.   He maintains that the success of the alternative education student will come when this student remains in the alternative environment until he or she graduates.

In his research, Williamson (2008) defined continuation schools as systems that operate in the gap between mainstream public high schools and social services and serve at-risk students who are in need of resources normally outside the jurisdiction or purview of the classroom. Williamson (2008) contends the evolution of continuation education was based on German and British models. Local officials and educators are responsible for the core of continuation schooling in that this type of schooling developed as an adaptive response to compulsory education. In this sense, he contends that over the years, continuation or alternative education has repeatedly transformed itself in response to changing social, political, and economic demands. Continuation schools are student centered and serve as a safety net that provides holistic approaches and resources in response to student needs. Further, this type of education has filled many roles in the last century, including citizenship training, vocational guidance, adjustment education and dropout recovery.

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Alternative Programs

The National Conference of State Legislatures (2009) contends that alternative education programs vary nationwide depending on the individual program's objectives, goals and scope of program implementation. While it is estimated that there are more than twenty thousand alternative programs and separate alternative schools in operation in the United States, a review of the literature suggests that alternative education programs tend to cluster across topical themes and provide differentiation in their overall function.

The Education Commission of the States (2009) asserts that the diverse, personalized programs that target student strengths are the biggest advantages of alternative schooling. Further, the organization contends that that alternative education for high school students is designed to meet a variety of student needs and offers programs that typically emphasize individual instruction, basic academic skills, social services, and community or work-based learning. Additionally, alternative education programs have criteria for enrollment, serve students for varying amounts of time, and are accessed by students in a variety ways from student choice to mandatory placement.

Raywid (1994) asserts that some schools are characterized as schools of choice such as school-within-school specialized programs and magnet schools that attract students based on curriculum flexibility. Other schools are viewed as last chance schools that tend to focus on reeducating students on pro-social behaviors, behavior management and modification while the third type of alternative environment focuses on academic improvement. Such schools provide opportunities for students to increase their academic and social skills. Although Raywid distinguishes between various types of programs, the

literature proves that most alternative programs are hybrid in nature in that they often integrate elements of all three approaches to alternative education.

In her research on public alternative schools, Conley (2002) synthesizes their common characteristics. First, while alternative schools primarily have a voluntary clientele and provide an option for students, parents and teachers, she asserts that their student population should reflect the socioeconomic and racial makeup of the entire community. Second, the reason alternative schools exist is to be more responsive to specific educational needs within the community than traditional schools have been. Third, alternative schools usually have more comprehensive goals than their traditional counterparts. Such comprehensive goals may include improving a student's self-concept or preparing students for vocations, college or various roles in society. Fourth, while alternative schools are more flexible and responsive to planned evolution and change than conventional schools, they rely on feedback and formative evaluation in formulating and modifying their curricula. Finally, since alternative schools tend to be smaller than traditional schools, they have fewer rules and bureaucratic constraints on students and teachers (Conley, 2002).

From the year 2000 through 2003, the Alternative Network Journal (2003) examined fifteen alternative education programs in an effort to uncover common attributes and draw conclusions about 'what makes an alternative school alternative?' This study examined programs in California, Canada, Connecticut, Illinois, Maryland, Massachusetts, Michigan, Minnesota, New Jersey, New York, Ohio, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Vermont and Virginia. The Alternative Network Journal reports some important patterns, some of which echo Conley's findings, from its research relating to

alternative education programs: the students have not been successful at their home schools; it is difficult to get high family involvement; classes are small; students who qualify for free or reduced lunch are disproportionately represented in the school population; all of the programs, except for the elementary school in Connecticut, incorporate some element in their structure that helps students prepare for the world of work; all of the programs have rolling admissions; the students and staff like each other; and lastly, funding for the programs is usually a combination of district money and grants (Alternative Network Journal, 2003).

     Lange and Sletten (2002) identified a number of essential characteristics for effective alternative programs. These characteristics include specific program goals and enrollment criteria, small class sizes, student decision making, opportunities for relevant experiences aligned to the future goals of the student population, flexibility, a focus on the academic as well as the social-emotional needs of the students, as well as professional development for teachers. DuCloux (2009) found that key characteristics of alternative education include individuality or self-efficacy, social connections, as well as a supportive environment and relationships.

     Throughout their research, Leone and Drakeford (1999) posit that a clear focus on academic learning, ambitious professional development, a strong level of autonomy and professional decision-making and a sense of community are the elements needed to ensure success in alternative programs. In addition, these programs must have a well-defined place within public schools and use the community as a resource to service their students.

The Study of Effective Alternative Education Programs: Final Grant Report conducted by the American Institutes for Research (2006) outlined the importance of several components to the functioning and implementation of alternative programs:

1. Program philosophies emphasize that it is the educational approach rather than the individual student that needs to be changed to accommodate learning differences among at-risk students.

2. Program administrators and staff subscribe to the philosophy that all students can learn. These programs communicate and support high expectations for positive social, emotional, behavioral, and academic growth in students.

3. Program and school administrators are leaders who support the vision and mission of their programs; effectively support staff; listen to teachers, students, and parents, and genuinely care about their students.

4. Low adult-student ratios in the classroom are considered integral to successful outcomes.

5. Teachers receive specialized training (e.g., behavior and classroom management, alternative learning styles, communication with families) to support their effectiveness in working with students who do not succeed in traditional educational settings.

6. Interactions between students and staff are non-authoritarian in nature. Positive, trusting, and caring relationships exist between staff, and between students and staff.

7. The opinions and participation of family members in the education of their children is valued, and students' families are treated with respect (p. ii).

Based on the study's findings, alternative education students have the opportunity to thrive in alternative learning environments where they believe they are supported, respected, valued and cared about by teachers, staff and administrators. These students also benefit from being in a flexible, fair learning environment where there is a nonauthoritarian approach to teaching.

Special Issues, Challenges, Problems

Bower (2008) contends the challenges alternative schools face include serving as dumping grounds for unwanted students and receiving limited funding. Further, he asserts that alternative programs are not usually designed with the needs of the at-risk student in mind. Rather, they are usually started to remove the "problem" students from the traditional school environment to improve that environment for the at-risk student's counterparts. According to Guerin and Denti (1999) young people in alternative settings have often been encouraged to leave the traditional classroom environment or have been officially excluded from mainstream education.

Typically, these students are disproportionately poor, disabled, from minority groups, and share several of the following characteristics: poor literacy and academic skills, inadequate social, emotional and behavioral skills, alienation from school, low self-esteem, limited language proficiency, ethnic or racial discrimination, impulsivity and poor judgment, limited or unavailable family support, anti-social peer influence, and lack of positive adult role models. Additionally, this student population is often transitory, unresponsive, suspicious, antisocial, and isolated and may have learning, emotional, and cognitive disabilities. Powell (2003) describes alternative education students as students

who were typically transferred from traditional programs due to possession, distribution, or use of alcohol or drugs, physical attacks or fights, chronic truancy, possession or use of a weapon other than a firearm, continual academic failure, disruptive verbal behavior, and/or possession of a firearm. Unfortunately, the aforementioned characteristics may seem to paint a relatively dim or negative picture of the alternative school student. Such characteristics may cause these students to be unfairly labeled and possibly discriminated against.

Richard Sagor (1999) is adamant that at-risk students should be treated with equity. He believes that policies affecting our youth must protect vulnerable children from the dire consequences of poor decisions made by other people on their behalf. In light of his views he proposes a set of criteria for an equitable youth education policy. Sagor (1999) believes that disadvantaged students should attend schools where academic skills are fostered and they will be afforded the opportunity to achieve. These students should not be segregated by demographic factors including race or economic status nor there any type of stigma or status on their choice of enrollment in a program that is publicly funded.

Sagor positions himself as an advocate or ally for alternative education students. While he does not take issue with alternative programs in general, he cautions that although in theory these schools are designed to meet the needs of the students they serve, this is not always the case. He asserts that the strategic use of alternative programs coupled with attention to the four criteria has the potential to be one of the better ways to provide every American child access to a worthwhile education.

In her work involving educational resilience and the at-risk student population, Aronson's (2001) outlook on student equity mirrors Sagor's views. "Successful adaptation despite risk and adversity" is the common definition of resilience Aronson uses. She believes that society is responsible for offering unequal opportunities to American children and cautions that educational resilience among low-income, often at-risk students would not be such a salient issue if society made different social, ideological and cultural choices. While it is to their credit that at-risk students are often able to overcome various characteristic odds associated with this population, such resilience can lead to apathy on the part of society.

Aronson (2001) asserts that in moderate circles resilience is used as a type of confirmation that all students have an equal opportunity to education. The thinking is that if some students can make it despite the odds that may be against them, then, with effort, all students can make it. Such logic implies that our system of education works and therefore the responsibility of ensuring success lies with each individual, regardless of circumstances.   In conservative circles resilience is an irrelevant concept because of the erroneous belief that differences in intelligence and academic success are genetically determined by race. This conservative ideology that views success and failure as predetermined sees no validity in changing the educational system when the outcomes are inevitable. In more progressive circles however, the predominant response to resilience among the at-risk population is that while the responsibility for success ultimately lies with the individual, it is the duty of schools to offset the effects of obstacles faced by at-risk students and to make them competitive with their peers. In this sense, resilience is an

attribute that can be measured, fostered, and administered to at-risk students to ensure their success.

Although it is commendable that a number of alternative education students have exhibited resiliency, it is still the charge of our educational system to ensure that all students are successful. Increasingly, as a direct result of the No Child Left Behind legislation, alternative education programs are feeling the demands of higher standards and greater accountability. While standards and accountability is a worthy and non-negotiable goal, it is a difficult goal for many alternative programs to meet. *Options for alternative education: Change schools or change law* (2008) addressed the likelihood that alternative schools may become unintended casualties of tougher state requirements in the era of NCLB. Many alternative programs do not use the standards set by states for regular education because of the particular needs of their student population. Although more and more states require alternative education students to pass the same high-stakes tests as those in regular programs, attempts to raise standards for alternative students cannot simply follow the model created for regular schools.

The challenge then is to ensure that alternative education has the human, academic and organizational resources to respond to higher standards in ways that are not antithetical to its mission and structure (Kraemer & Ruzzi, 2001). The authors focus on the human resource of teacher quality and assert that alternative education teachers must be fully prepared, well compensated and given the appropriate professional development to meet the needs of their students. Abe (2008) echoes several of Kraemer and Ruzzi's findings. She contends that teacher collaboration, staff training and strong leadership are the teacher centered hallmarks of alternative education. Further, Abe (2008) finds

student centered high expectations, self-paced lessons, student internships, and flexible school hours allow at-risk students to thrive. Academically, alternative education students need resources that address the conceptual understandings found in more rigorous standards yet still appeal to the students' interests.

Organizationally, alternative programs may need more time than their regular education counterparts to allow their students to reach standards. Many times alternative education students are deficient by one or more grade levels in key subject areas such as reading and math. Additionally, a percentage of at-risk students do not begin school in September and finish in June, and many move in and out of programs as their personal circumstances change or have poor attendance due to chronic truancy. As a result, these programs may need more time to bring their students up to speed and help them be successful.

Overall Provisions of No Child Left Behind

According to the Pennsylvania Department of Education (2009), No Child Left Behind requires that all students are proficient or above in reading and mathematics by 2014. As a result, schools must demonstrate that they are making progress toward that goal. To this end, each year, the Pennsylvania Department of Education (PDE) determines the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) status of each school. The AYP status levels for schools are primarily determined by the school's Pennsylvania System of School Assessment (PSSA) results the previous school year. Schools must show Adequate Yearly Progress in the measurable areas of achievement and test participation on the PSSA, as well as attendance or graduation rates.

In order to make AYP schools must meet all AYP targets including performance targets for subgroups. Schools demonstrate AYP for their overall student population and for all racial and ethnic groups, students with limited English proficiency, economically disadvantaged students, and special education students. In Pennsylvania the major racial and ethnic groups are White, African American or Black, Latino/Hispanic, Asian or Pacific Islander, American Indian or Alaskan students, and Multiracial students. If these subgroups contain less than forty students, although PDE does not separately evaluate that subgroup for AYP, the subgroup is counted in the school's overall student population

Achievement on the PSSA is determined by the percentage of students that meet or exceed scores at the Proficient level in mathematics and reading. The performance levels include Advanced, Proficient, Basic, and Below Basic. In order to meet the test participation threshold for AYP, at least 95% of students overall and within each subgroup must take the PSSA. The participation rate is calculated by taking the number of students who took the test and dividing by the actual enrollment of the tested group for each subgroup. This rate is based on those students who are enrolled in a school as of the last day of the assessment window regardless of whether or not the students were enrolled for a full academic year.

The attendance rate is based on the entire school and applies to schools that do not have a high school graduating class. The attendance target is 90% or any improvement from the previous year. The graduation rate applies to schools that have a high school graduating class and only includes students enrolled in that class. The graduation rate target is 80% or any improvement from the previous year.   For attendance and graduation rates, the previous year's data is used in the AYP calculation.

A school can earn one of the following AYP distinctions: Met AYP, Making Progress, Warning, School Improvement1, School Improvement 2, Corrective Action, Corrective Action 2- First Year, Corrective Action 2- Second Year, Corrective Action 2- Third Year, or Corrective Action 2- Fourth Year. If a school does not meet all of its Adequate Yearly Progress for two consecutive years, the school is placed in Improvement 1 status. As a result, the school needs to meet Adequate Yearly Progress two years in a row to be considered on track for meeting No Child Left Behind's goal of all students attaining proficiency in reading and math by 2014.   Report cards for each school in each district are made available to provide the public with test results. If a school or district continually fails to make adequate yearly progress it will be held accountable. Such a school or district will be responsible for improving academic performance. Additionally, schools in Pennsylvania must submit a School Improvement Plan each year to the Pennsylvania Department of Education that outlines how the school will strive to attain the 2014 Proficiency requirement.

Finally, the Pennsylvania Performance Index is a provision of No Child Left Behind designed to measure growth across all levels of the PSSA. Instead of merely focusing on students who move from the Basic to the Proficient level, the Pennsylvania Performance Index allows each school and subgroup within that school to start at its own baseline. The state sets the criteria for schools and subgroups to meet AYP goals using the Pennsylvania Performance Index. While the Index still requires that schools and subgroups reach 100% Proficiency by 2014, it can be used to measure significant growth and meet AYP targets. Because the Pennsylvania Performance Index shows significant

growth including growth from the Below Basic to the Basic level, it indicates that low performing schools are laying the foundation to meet AYP goals.

Criticisms Leveled at No Child Left Behind

Ramirez and Clark (2009) report Education Secretary Arne Duncan is critical of the punitive aspects of NCLB and wants to rename the law. While Duncan supports NCLB's focus on student achievement and accountability, he believes states should adopt academic standards that are in alignment with other leading nations. Duncan perceives the idea of 50 states having 50 different standards as illogical and detrimental to students. Regarding his concern about NCLB's emphasis on standardized testing, Duncan asserts in addition to developing better tests, states should also develop data management systems that enable teachers to track the progress of individual students. Duncan contends "If you have great assessments and real-time data for teachers and parents that say these are the student's strengths and weaknesses, that's a real healthy thing" (p.1).

The National Center for Fair and Open Testing, (2007) also believes that placing such a great deal of emphasis on standardized testing is problematic. In lieu of standardized testing, the organization proposes evaluating student achievement or ability through performance-based documentation of student work and good teacher observation. Such evaluation involves the direct evaluation of student effort using real learning tasks and provides more useful material for the government, community, teachers and parents than standardized testing.

Tumasz (2001) posits the concept of the standardized test is flawed in that it requires a standardized curriculum. However, the state and federal government assumes

that the information tested on the PSSA is the information all students in a particular

grade level have been taught and are expected to know. Such logic is troublesome in that

it does not take into consideration that some students are below grade level, have not

learned certain skills, or may be poor test takers. Alfie Kohn (2001) calls the entire

testing "enterprise" into question and proposes that to make schools better equipped to

educate our nation's students we must rethink standardized testing. Kohn contends the

standards movement is incompatible with excellence. He is troubled by the concept of

teaching to the test and considers the practice both monotonous and impersonal. Another

consequence of standardized testing that Kohn refutes is the elimination or reduction of

programs in the arts and electives in an effort to allow more time to teach to the test.

While No Child Left Behind requires states to determine Adequate Yearly

Progress for every public school and district, it assumes that these decisions will be valid

and reliable in correctly identifying schools for interventions designed to improve their

achievement. However, the rigid nature of the No Child Left Behind Adequate Yearly

Progress system increases the possibility of misidentifying schools as needing

improvement. Because of its rigidity in the calculation of AYP and its reliance on the

PSSA to measure performance, the emphasis NCLB places on standardized testing is a

problematic aspect of the legislation. Ultimately, inaccurate results may lead to the

undermining of both students and schools.

Equating proficiency on the PSSA with academic success or excellence sets

public schools and public school children up to fail according to Weaver (2003) former

president of the National Education Association, the nation's largest teachers union. The

union supports the modification of No Child Left Behind's ambitious goal of having all students reach Proficiency by 2014. Meier argues

> The kind of accountability seen in state after state, and reinforced be the federal Elementary and Secondary Act, is bad for schools, educators, and most of all children. It diminishes the power of public education, belittles educators' professional judgment, and ignores what we know about how best to organize schooling and educate children. It will not educate all children or close the achievement gap (p.33).

Kohn (2002) contends that No Child Left Behind is an ill-informed version of school reform that is being embraced by politicians. The problem with the type of accountability required by No Child Left Behind is that it is simply a euphemism for increased control over what happens in classrooms by people who are not in classrooms. Linking accountability to high stakes tests such as the PSSA compromises schools because schools become solely test oriented.

Ginsberg (2004) criticizes NCLB from a slightly different vantage point and specifically discusses the troubling aspects of NCLB that impact urban schools. She contends urban schools are the "constant focus of reform in a culture that presumably wishes to educate its citizens in the most democratic, equitable fashion possible" (p.1). Ginsberg (2004) takes the notion of standardized testing a step further when she focuses on the consequences for students and schools that do not reach AYP. Publicly funded schools risk losing federal funds if they are unable to raise standardized test scores. Consequently, NCLB mandates these schools provide additional school choices for failing students. Ginsberg (2004) points out, however, that in the majority of urban,

economically disadvantaged school districts, these "additional school choices" are non-existent. Karp (2004) concurs and outlines the absurdity of the mandates NCLB places on schools. He questions how the legislation can expect schools to eradicate existing inequalities while the factors that create those inequalities remain in place.

Ginsberg (2004) also contends urban schools are set up to fail due to a lack of resources. These schools are often unable to compete with schools that receive significantly more funding. Similarly, Karp (2004) asserts schools that are denied resources cannot be expected to close achievement gaps when so many of the social factors of inequality remain in place. He asserts that rather than being a system of accountability, the aforementioned scenario is merely a "politically designed set-up" (p.8).

Such a set-up may refer to the notion of privatizing public schools where profit-seeking companies propose their ability to manage schools and produce better results without substantial funding increases. Ginsberg (2004) questions the merit of privatization in that these profit-seeking companies lack a track record. Additionally, these companies often refer to students using business jargon such as "commodities", "outputs", and "human capital." This is problematic she contends because students are individuals and have complex interests and needs.

In light of the various criticisms surrounding NCLB, it seems evident that what is needed is a vision or goal for education that focuses on accountability yet moves beyond standardized testing to a more meaningful, equitable method of reaching all students and distributing resources.

Summary

This review of the literature has outlined the history of alternative education, characteristics of at-risk students, overall provisions of No Child Left Behind as well as the criticisms leveled against the legislation. Although the literature reviewed and cited offered detailed information concerning alternative schools, the at-risk student population and No Child Left Behind's provisions and criticisms, it did not address the perceptions of alternative school teachers and administrators about the impact of the provisions of No Child Left Behind on their schools. This researcher believes that true progress can only be made once the specific provisions of No Child Left Behind that alternative school teachers and administrators perceive as being the most problematic are identified. This study was unique in that it spoke directly to the alternative school teachers and administrators who interact with at-risk students daily and utilized their expertise to analyze what they perceive as problem areas and why and how these problem areas might be addressed.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

The first chapter introduced the issues associated with No Child Left Behind as it pertains to alternative schools and the at-risk student population they serve. While the literature suggests that this student population has unique characteristics that need to be addressed in order for these students to achieve success in school, the monolithic demands of NCLB of standardization and uniformity of educational progress would seem to be in direct opposition.

The next chapter focused on the literature that documents the history of alternative education programs and schools and made note of the special issues and challenges associated with the at-risk student population.

This chapter addresses the research methods and approaches used in investigating the perceptions of alternative school teachers and administrators about the impact of the provisions of No Child Left Behind on their school. Specifically, the following questions were addressed by this study:

What has been the impact of No Child Left Behind on alternative schools?

What areas of the school do you feel have been most directly impacted or affected?

From your perspective, what responses might be most appropriate to address the problems or issues arising from the impact of No Child Left Behind?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this qualitative, exploratory study was to investigate and examine the perceptions of alternative school teachers and administrators about the impact of the provisions of No Child Left Behind on their students and school. This study was designed to investigate, through the lens of alternative school practitioners, the intersection of at-risk students, alternative education programs, and NCLB.

Site and Participant Selection

Qualitative research suggests that the site for and participants in a study are extremely important. Marshall and Rossman (1999) contend that a realistic site is where entry is possible; there is a high probability that a rich mix of the processes, people, programs, interactions, and structures of interest are present; the researcher is likely to be able to build trusting relations with the participants in the study; and data quality and credibility of the study are reasonably assured. This researcher utilized as the site for this study the alternative school in Pennsylvania where she has taught for the past twenty years. During her tenure at this school the researcher developed a rapport with her fellow faculty members and administrators. Using this school guaranteed this researcher entry as well as trusting relationships with the participants.

The practitioners who participated in this study were selected based on their expertise in alternative education. Because I have taught in this school for a number of years, I felt very comfortable addressing the issues involving at-risk students in the era of NCLB as posing serious problems in this school, district, state of Pennsylvania and on a national level as well.

The Role of the Researcher

Marshall and Rossman (1999) describe the researcher as the instrument in qualitative studies because it is the researcher who enters into the lives of the participants in a personal way. As a researcher or instrument, it was imperative for me to utilize my interpersonal skills. I perceive myself as a sensitive, compassionate, patient person and an effective listener. These skills have assisted me in building trust, respecting the norms of reciprocity, maintaining relationships and addressing ethical concerns in a sensitive manner.

I pondered my role as a researcher and was able to share it with the participants in a manner that they perceived as genuine and sincere. I have the utmost respect for the participants, the wealth of knowledge they possess, and the insights that they have regarding this phenomena. I was fully aware that I asked the participants to give of their precious time to be interviewed. Therefore I was sensitive to the notion that in order to be interviewed, many of the participants had to adjust their priorities, routines and schedules to participate in this study. For these reasons, it was imperative that the participants were willing volunteers.

My experience as an alternative education teacher and my familiarity with the district and local contacts assisted me in identifying the participants for this study. Although I spoke with these individuals in person I sought their participation via email through a formal letter inviting their participation (see Appendix A). I shared with them my role as a researcher and my interest in investigating this phenomenon. I also completed The Pennsylvania State University Human Subject Approval forms prior to beginning my research.   Borg and Gall (1989) offer that the protection of individual

privacy in educational research involves the consent of the individual regarding what will be disclosed to the researcher and the confidential use of the research data that will be collected on the participants. For these reasons, each participant was given a thorough explanation of the research procedures that were used and the importance of their participation.

Because this study focuses on the perceptions of alternative school faculty and administration, I did not approach support staff personnel. While the faculty included thirteen classroom teachers and three counselors, the two nurses were not included. Nine out of the nineteen members of the alternative school's faculty and administration agreed to participate (see Table 1). The tenth participant was an administrator at the local Intermediate Unit (IU). While this participant's current position at the IU requires him to focus on curriculum and professional development across a number of districts, his previous administrative position was in the school district that is the focus of this study.

<div align="center">Data Collection</div>

. Qualitative researchers seek to understand. The foundation of this research was its reliance on the inductive approach, focus on specific situations or people, and its emphasis on words rather than numbers (Maxwell, 1996). Five purposes shape the work of qualitative research: (1) understanding the meaning, for participants in the study, of the events, situations, and actions they are involved with and the accounts that they give of their lives and experiences, (2) understanding the particular context within which the participants act, and the influence that this context has on their actions, (3) identifying unanticipated phenomena and influences, and generating new grounded theories about

the latter, (4) understanding the process by which events and actions take place, and (5) developing causal explanations (Maxwell, 1996). Additionally, Marshall and Rossman (1999) view qualitative research as a broad approach to the study of social phenomena.

Throughout my study I remained cognizant of Maxwell (1996) and Marshall and Rossman's (1999) assertions. My goal as a researcher was to understand the meaning the participants associated with NCLB based on their experiences working with an at-risk student population. The participants' perceptions of the issues associated with NCLB were based and influenced by their role as alternative education practitioners. Additionally, I identified unanticipated phenomena and influences that impacted the participants. As such, the participants' responses were influenced by their perception of NCLB as the catalyst for the sweeping changes that accompanied the 2005-2006 school year. I attempted to understand the process the participants used to make meaning of the phenomena and develop causal explanations by grouping the data into various themes.

I used interviews to analyze the perspectives of alternative education teachers and administrators. Marshall and Rossman (1999) assert that qualitative in-depth interviews resemble conversations rather than formal events with predetermined response categories. These interviews allowed me to explore several general topics in an effort to uncover the participant's views. It was mandatory that I respected how the participants structured their responses so that the participant's perspective on the phenomenon could unfold.

Through these in-depth interviews, this qualitative study also investigated and analyzed the impact of No Child Left Behind on their students and school, the areas the participants felt have been most directly impacted or affected and the responses they believed were appropriate to address any problems or issues associated with NCLB.

The participants in this study consisted of ten volunteer alternative education teachers and administrators employed by or affiliated with the local alternative school in Pennsylvania that is the focus of this study. These educators engaged in direct, daily interaction with at-risk students. The in-depth interview method was used to gain an understanding of the issues that these participants associate with No Child Left Behind as it relates to this student population. The teachers and administrators were asked to participate in an interview that lasted approximately one half hour as well as several, subsequent follow-up interviews. Creswell (1998) acknowledges the amount of time needed to collect extensive data and recommends limited data collection such as one or two interviews so that researchers can estimate the time needed to collect data. In addition, I did not want my research to interfere with or usurp the professional obligations of the participants.

Thus, the interviews were scheduled at the convenience of the teachers and administrators. Both the place and time for these interviews were determined by the participants. The interview sites included teachers' classrooms as well as the offices of administrators and counselors.

I spent a considerable amount of time formulating and composing my interview questions. Maxwell (1996) asserts that while the research questions constitute what the researcher wants to understand, the actual interview questions are essential and critical in that they are what the researcher asks in order to gain that understanding. Therefore, creativity and insight are necessary in the development of effective interview questions. I attempted to anticipate to the best of my ability, how particular interview questions would

be understood by the participants and how they were likely to respond to them (see Appendix B).

As each of the interviews commenced, I briefly presented to the participants my role and interests as well as the goals and purpose of the study. Once I received permission from the participants, I tape-recorded the conversations held with these teachers and administrators and jotted down field notes when necessary. In addition to interview data, since the school was truly the unit of analysis, observation was a significant form of data collection. The researcher believes that the use of in-depth interviews coupled with observation provided a more thorough and complete understanding of the phenomenon.

Cresswell (1998) contends that the case study research design involves the widest array of data collection as the researcher attempts to build an in-depth picture of the case. Yin (1989) concurs with Cresswell and refers to multiple forms of case study data collection. These forms include documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation and physical artifacts. In addition to the in-depth interviews, the information I gathered as a participant observer was an important source of data collection in this study.

Marshall and Rossman (1999) assert that participant observation, developed from the disciplines of cultural anthropology and qualitative sociology, is not only a method for gathering data but an overall approach to inquiry. Moreover, it is to some degree an essential element of all qualitative studies in that it requires the researcher to be involved firsthand in the social world chosen for the study. Further, Marshall and Rossman (1999)

suggest that such immersion affords the researcher the opportunity to hear, see and begin to experience reality as the participants do.

As a New School faculty member and participant observer I was able to immerse myself in the school. I observed firsthand the daily routines as well as various components, and aspects of the school and kept observational records through the use of field notes. Marshall and Rossman (1999) contend that field notes are detailed, nonjudgmental, concrete descriptions of what has been observed. I remained cognizant of this contention as I described and analyzed the site as part of the thick, rich description in Chapter Four that chronicled the history and evolution of New School.

I gathered data from New School's daily routines that included academic course offerings, faculty meetings, and informal conversations amongst students and teachers. Additionally, data was gathered from my observations of the components or aspects of the program that included New School's Open House and Awards Assembly, field trips, service learning, advisory periods, and PSSA administration.

Another significant source of data collection in this study was archival data and document analysis. Along with the information gathered from participant observation, both of these forms of data collection were integral in contributing to the rich, thick description of New School included in Chapter Four. Marshall and Rossman (1999) contend that the history and context surrounding a specific setting comes, in part, from reviewing documents. Further, researchers supplement interviewing and participant observation with gathering and analyzing documents produced in the course of everyday events or constructed specifically for the research at hand. Additionally, Marshall and

Rossman (1999) define archival data as the routinely gathered records of a society, community or organization that may further supplement other qualitative methods.

I utilized document analysis in this study when I perused numerous brochures and newsletters from the site, district website information, curriculum, as well as the alternative school's School Improvement Plan and United States Census data. I also familiarized myself with archival data concerning the site from local and regional newspapers and texts that focused on the town in which the site is located. The use of archival data and document analysis complemented the data gathered from the in-depth interviews and participant observation. Further, using multiple methods of data collection allowed me as the researcher to paint a more accurate, vivid picture of the site in an attempt to understand the phenomena.

Data Analysis and Management

Data analysis is designed to bring order, structure, and interpretation to the mass of collected data (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). My goal was to interpret the data in a coherent manner. In this I was guided by my initial understandings and interpretations although I proceeded with the notion that these early conceptions could be modified or altered as I collected and analyzed the data.

As I began to conduct the interviews, I also began simultaneous data analysis and read through the transcriptions numerous times. My quest was to discover the general categories of meaning in which to place the data. Patton (1990) refers to this inductive analysis process as an analyst-constructed typology. Such typologies are created by the researcher. Although grounded in data they are not explicitly used by the participants.

Instead of merely restating or recounting what the participants said, my task as the researcher was to uncover meaning and establish patterns, themes, and categories from the data.

According to Marshall and Rossman (1999) a researcher should search for other explanations within and links among the data he or she collects. They posit that such alternative explanations always exist and that it is the researcher's job to look for, identify, and describe them and then demonstrate how the chosen explanation is the most feasible. (Marshall & Rossman, 1999). Once the interview data was transcribed, I looked across the responses for commonalities and links concerning the impact of NCLB on at-risk students to determine the meaning the respondents brought to the phenomena.

Finally, data management ensured participant anonymity and confidentiality throughout data collection and after its completion. All data were stored in a locked file cabinet and labeled with a code for each participant. Only I had access to the file cabinet.

Trustworthiness and Credibility

Marshall and Rossman (1999) contend that all research must be judged on its trustworthiness and soundness. They argue that the researcher should determine the credibility of his or her findings as well the criteria that the findings can be judged against. The researcher should also aim to be reasonably sure that the findings reflect the participants and the inquiry and are not the result of a fabrication based on the researcher's prejudices and biases.

The use of multiple data collection methods enabled me to increase the level of trustworthiness and soundness in my research. While reliance upon one or even two

methods of data collection may have allowed my biases and prejudices to enter into the study, the use of multiple methods that included interviews, participant observation, document analysis, and archival data, allowed me to approach the phenomena on the basis of inquiry as opposed to bias.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) assert that there are four alternative constructs that reflect the assumptions of qualitative research. The goal of the first, credibility, is to demonstrate that the study was conducted in a manner that ensures that the subject was accurately identified and described. Chapter Four's thick, rich description of the evolution of New School coupled with the multiple methods I used for data collection add to the study's credibility in that these methods are comprehensive in nature. The second construct is transferability. This is reached when the researcher determines his or her findings will be useful to others in similar situations with similar research questions. While the findings from this study are not transferable or generalizable, it is important. This study places in the spotlight the teachers and administrators who experience the impact of NCLB on at-risk students and alternative programs and may be useful to other alternative school teachers and administrators as they grapple with the ramifications of NCLB.

The third construct, dependability, involves an attempt on the part of the researcher to account for changing conditions in the phenomenon or changes in the design of the study as a result of a better understanding of the setting. I attempted to address the changing conditions in the phenomena by acknowledging that the participants viewed NCLB as the catalyst for the sweeping changes that altered New School. Additionally, I addressed the unanticipated changes in the phenomena by referring to

Hannan, Polos and Carroll's (2003) chain of cascading effects that began with the NCLB requirements and sanctions and ended with radical changes to New School's mission and structure. Hannan, Polos and Carroll (2003) contend that, as in the case of New School, occurrences of cascading change are almost always unanticipated and mostly unpredictable.

Lastly, confirmability, the fourth construct, involves objectivity and the notion that the findings of one study can be confirmed by another. In other words, the data should help confirm the general findings and lead to the implications arrived at by the researcher. In preparation for my research I read numerous studies on alternative education and at-risk students. In my Review of the Literature in Chapter Two I referred to a variety of studies that addressed this particular student population. My study confirms the general findings of other studies including Abe, 2008; Bishop, 1989; Bower, 2008; Conley, 2002, Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; DuCloux, 2009; Dunbar, 2001; Fantini, 1976; Kronick, 1997; Manning & Baruth, 1995; Presseisen, 1988; Quinn & Poirier, 2006; Rossi, 1994; Sanders, 2000; Williamson, 2008; and Young, 1990, that focus on the importance of addressing the specific needs of at-risk students so that they can achieve educational success. This confirmation of the general findings led to and correlates with my Conclusions and Recommendations for alternative school practitioners and policymakers in response to NCLB.

Polkinghorne (1989) refers to validity as the notion that an idea is well grounded and supported. In an effort to establish truth, Moustakas (1994) believes that the researcher must begin with his or her own perception. He asserts that the researcher must look inward and reflect on the meaning of the experience and then look outward to the

participants to establish intersubjective validity by testing this understanding with others through social interaction and informant feedback. I remained cognizant of the issue of validity throughout my study by reflecting on the participants' interview data, attempting to accurately depict their perceptions of the phenomena through my own interpretation of their responses and then relying on the use of feedback through participant member checks. Another resource that added to the validity of my study was the expertise of my committee, especially my dissertation director. Additionally, as I looked inward and reflected on the meaning the participants brought to the impact of NCLB on at-risk students and alternative schools, I had to be cognizant of my own biases and prejudices in an effort to remain as objective as possible in my interpretation and analysis of the data.

Further, triangulation of my data collection methods added to the validity of this study. Denzin (1970) defines triangulation as collecting information from a diverse range of individuals and settings using a variety of methods. He suggests the use of triangulation reduces the risk that the researcher's conclusions will only reflect the limitations or biases of a specific method of data collection. Additionally, triangulation allows the researcher to gain a better assessment of the validity and generality of the explanations he or she develops. Rather than relying on one method of data collection, as Yin (1989) recommended, I used multiple methods. Analyzing the data I gathered from the in-depth interviews, participant observation, document analysis as well as archival data helped me eliminate biases and arrive at my conclusions and recommendations for the phenomena as objectively as possible.

To facilitate external audits in an effort to provide an external check of the research process and examine the accuracy of the product and process of the study, the

researcher relied on the expertise of her dissertation director and committee for critical feedback and guidance. Additionally, I engaged the participants in member checks so that they could judge the accuracy and credibility of the account once the data were collected and analyzed. I asked them to clarify, critique, and examine my interpretation of their view of the phenomenon. Most participants agreed with the interpretation and depiction of their views. A few of the participants chose to clarify comments they made by adding specific details. I welcomed this input and added it to my analysis. I then approached these participants again so that they could read the changes and determine whether the revision captured their true perspective regarding the phenomenon. Because the participants accepted or approved my second attempt at data interpretation and representation, I felt that the perceptions of the alternative school teachers and administrators were portrayed as accurately as possible.

Finally, throughout the entire study I remained cognizant of my own biases as a researcher. Because of my own deep level of involvement with and commitment to alternative education, I recognized the importance of this topic to me and its possible influence on my interpretation and meaning-making. Because of this I was continually cognizant of my biases and beliefs and consistently worked to recognize and hold in check my own prejudices and to be as impartial and objective as possible.

Limitations of the Study

Although this study adds to our body of knowledge about the intersection of alternative schools, at-risk students, and NCLB, it, like other studies, is not without limitations. As Patton (1990) warns, "There are no perfect research designs. There are

always trade-offs" (p. 162). This researcher was fully cognizant that this study had limitations.

Because this was a qualitative study that relied on open ended, in-depth interviews with educators and administrators, scheduling difficulties were a distinct limitation in that finding convenient time periods of sufficient length to discuss critical issues was often challenging. While not an insurmountable issue, the affordance of a more generous allotment of time for the interviews would have been desirable.

It is also important to note that I was a participant observer. As a graduate of the traditional high school in the district, and teacher for two decades at the alternative school, I acknowledge a heavy investment in this alternative school and the district as a whole. In addition to my role as teacher, I have also served in an administrative capacity in the absence of the school's principal or lead teacher. These different roles allowed me to interact with the faculty on several levels.

Since the site and number of participants in this study was very small, the findings from this study are clearly not transferable or generalizable to other settings. Nonetheless, this study is important because it gives voice to practitioners who have firsthand experience with the intersection of at-risk students, alternative education programs, and NCLB. For this reason alone, the findings may reveal new understandings about the interplay of NCLB requirements and the students it is designed to not leave behind.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE EVOLUTION OF A SCHOOL

The Evolution

In order to set the stage for data analysis, it was important to provide a detailed portrait of the site used in the current study. This description provides key background information for the analysis that follows by chronicling the history or evolution of the alternative school from its inception in 1978 through the 2005-2006 school year. Included in this in-depth picture of the school are a brief history of the school's establishment and mission, and a portrait of its students, staff, and administration across the years. This description provided the necessary context to understand the impact of the No Child Left Behind legislation.

The suburban school district, located approximately twenty miles outside Philadelphia, was the second largest school system in its county and served over six thousand nine hundred students. The students lived either in the town's main borough or in one of the two townships on its outskirts. The majority of the residents were blue collar, working-class people with a large number of single parent households headed predominately by women. According to the 2000 United States Census data, the median family income in the district's main borough was $46,465. The median family income levels for the two surrounding townships were significantly higher with one reported at $65,701 and the other at $72,424.

The district was comprised of eleven buildings: six elementary, three middle and two high schools. There were distinct and significant differences between the district's

high schools. The larger, traditional high school had a student body of approximately 1900 students. Its comprehensive program for students in grades nine through twelve featured core academic and elective courses as well as athletic and music programs, co-curricular and extra-curricular activities. The second high school was an alternative school that enrolled approximately 200 students in grades nine through twelve.

The Early Years: New School in the Late 70s Through the 80s

In the 1970s, the district's assistant superintendent proposed an idea to the school board aimed at decreasing the district's drop out rate. She presented a plan for an alternative high school for students in grades ten through twelve that would differ from a traditional, comprehensive high school. Although its curricula would include academics, the primary focus would be vocational. The board approved the proposal and, in 1978, the alternative school, New School, was born. This pseudonym, New School, was selected for the purposes of this study as the school appeared to reinvent itself several times across the years. Because it remained a traditional, comprehensive high school, the other high school was given the pseudonym, Traditional High School.

While Traditional High School was located in one of the townships, New School was in the district's borough. It was housed in a former elementary school, an imposing red brick building built in 1914 and one designated as a historic landmark. The building was connected to a stadium where Traditional High School football games and track and field events were held.

In its earliest years, the alternative high school voluntarily enrolled approximately forty students who had been identified as being at-risk for school failure at Traditional High School. A local newspaper article (*The Times Herald,* 1978), entitled "Job Skills

Program Set for Schools Here in September," chronicled the opening of the new program. The school's mission was to allow students to graduate with marketable academic and vocational-technical skills. As New School's guidance counselor/coordinator noted in the article, in order "to reduce the number of youths who leave school before being ready to succeed at jobs, the district will offer special opportunities at New School"- (p. A3). He continued "there is an urgent need to conduct a program for our young people who failed to obtain marketable skills in high school. Otherwise, high unemployment rates, losses in productivity and wages will continue in our communities" ("Job Program Set", 1978, p. A5). The profile of the student best suited for this new program was an eleventh or twelfth grader who met the following criteria: would like to pursue a vocational career but had not made a firm decision on a specific area, or did not participate in activities in their traditional school environment.

The newspaper article outlined the program through which the participants would develop vocational-technical skills for the world of work by rotating through a variety of areas during each nine-week grading period. Students could take carpentry, masonry, air conditioning and refrigeration, building and home maintenance, small engine repair and business office technology shop courses in addition to English, mathematics, science, social studies and physical education. Individual counseling was also a mandatory component of the school's program.

New School's faculty was comprised of a principal, guidance counselor, nurse and nine teachers. Two dual certification teachers facilitated instruction in the academic subjects with one teaching English and social studies and the other instructing math and science. The physical education teacher also taught health. One vocational teacher per

subject area provided instruction in carpentry, masonry, heating and air conditioning, building and home maintenance, small engine repair, and business office technology. The school support staff included a secretary, custodian, and cafeteria worker. New School's faculty and staff were predominantly male and Caucasian. The students were predominately male, and evenly split between Caucasian and African American.

As the years passed, the size of New School's student body, faculty and staff, and the number of courses it offered increased. In the mid 1980s, the school added ninth graders and the student population increased to approximately one hundred students. The school's faculty and staff also increased. The program had started with twelve faculty members and three support staff personnel. Staffing changes in the mid 1980s saw the addition of a lead teacher, social studies teacher, science teacher, special education teacher, Expectant Mother's teacher, horticulture teacher, and librarian while the small engine repair and heating and air conditioning vocational shops were eliminated. In addition, a special education aide and another cafeteria worker were added to New School's support staff. These changes increased the faculty to eighteen and the support staff to five employees.

New School students attended their academic courses for a half-day and participated in the schools' on site vocational shops, the employment-based cooperative education program or moved to the local technical school for the remainder of the day. Because the school continued to emphasize counseling, students were required to meet with their counselor for thirty minutes at least once a week. Topics discussed included social and emotional issues, academic progress, assessment and development of study and organizational skills, and career development.

During the mid to late eighties, New School's student population was approximately 25% female. In addition to the aforementioned vocational and academic programs, New School assumed educational responsibility for the district's pregnant high school students. According to a school brochure (1986), these young women could voluntarily attend the school's Expectant Mothers Program that coupled their academic courses with a focus on topics such as pregnancy, pre- and post-natal care, child development, nutrition, health, human sexuality and birth control, parenting and safety. The Expectant Mother's Program also provided individualized counseling for its students to address academic, emotional, and social needs of teenage mothers as well as group counseling for the parenting teens.

New School in the Early 1990s

According to a New School brochure (1992), the school's mission was to "give students confidence, knowledge, and the skills necessary to be successful in the community in an effort to produce graduates who are economically self-sufficient." In 1990, in an effort to keep the district's parenting students in school, New School expanded its program by opening an on-site daycare facility for its parenting students who had children aged six weeks to five years. This expansion required the addition of a childcare vocational shop teacher as well as two daycare aides. The onsite daycare was used by New School students in the Expectant Mothers Program after they delivered their babies. According to a New School brochure (1992), eligible students' day care fees were usually paid by the Department of Welfare or the county office of Child Day Care Services.

Each of New School's programs, academic and vocational alike, allowed students to earn high school credits that would count toward their high school diploma. During this period, the school was referred to as an *annex* of Traditional High School. Students could matriculate through the alternative program for as many as four years or for less than a year, receive a district diploma bearing the name of Traditional High School, and participate in Traditional's commencement ceremonies.

The Threat of Elimination

In 1993, in an effort to trim the district's budget, the superintendent announced his recommendation that the alternative program close at the end of the school year. Because it cost significantly more per student to operate the alternative high school, it was proposed that New School students would attend Traditional High School if the board voted in favor of the school's closure.

In an article, entitled "Alumni Make Appeal for New School: School Board may Eliminate Program," the district's local newspaper chronicled the school closing threat. According to the article, in January of 1993, the district superintendent recommended eliminating New School at the end of the school year to cut costs. Eliminating New School would save the district roughly $500,000 in teacher's salaries and cut approximately 20 jobs. The article noted "the alternative program emphasizes vocations for students struggling academically, provides smaller classes and has a voluntary program for expectant mothers" (p. A2). Additionally, the article (1993) reported that "school district officials credited the 14 year old program with reducing the district's dropout rate from the high teens in the 1970s to 7% in the fall of 1992" (p. A2). Alumni and current New School students attended the school board's public hearing on the

possible closing of New School. They passionately shared what the alternative school meant to them, and noted how it changed their lives. The newspaper article reported a number of students who spoke in support of the program recounted cutting classes and failing courses prior to attending New School. One student said that the program acted as a "safety net for many students" (p. A2) One alumnus said New School "turned me around and made me feel so different about myself"(p. A2). She added, "If I had been told as a student that the program was going to end, I would have called it quits" (p.A2). In support of the school, another alumnus asserted, "if you take our school away, you are going to let students fall from the high wire and if New School isn't there to catch them, who will? I don't know where I would be without New School" (p.A5). The former students spoke of their current occupations, which included everything from entrepreneurship and trade fields to managerial and supervisory positions requiring a four-year college degree. Regarding the $500,000 the district planned to save by eliminating the program, the article reported that the president of New School's Alumni Association stated, "What will be saved compared to a student's life" (p.A5)? Another graduate, among two dozen people who spoke at the meeting on behalf of the school, asserted "It's not about the money, it's about the kids" (p.A5). Many who spoke at the hearing that evening credited New School with turning around their lives. The secretary of the alumni association passionately shared with the audience:

> New School is a godsend. It was the smartest move I ever made. New School was here for me and now I'm here for it. The students do not want a new program. They want care, nurturing, a sense of belonging and pride. The experiment

worked. Why go back to the drawing board ("Alumni Make Appeal for New

School", 1993, p.A2)?

Were it not for New School, these former students argued, they would not be as

successful both professionally and personally.

In addition, the local newspaper article recounted that students who were

currently attending the school explained their perspective to the board. They spoke of the

differences between Traditional High School and their school and were adamant that

New School was the reason why they decided not to become high school dropouts. A

tenth grade student explained, "The teachers are like second parents to us. We want the

same place in the same way" (p.A2). That student's mother asked the board members,

"Why move them when they don't want to go and are afraid to go" (p.A2). Addressing

board members, another concerned parent stated, "You have an obligation to these

children. You should keep the program and let it serve as an example to other districts"

(p.A5). An eleventh grade New School student added, "If the program is cut, my

prediction is that many students will drop out of school. I came to the hearing because I

just can't let you throw New School to the side" (p.A5). The borough's mayor also spoke

in the school's favor. Impressed by the students' remarks and passion, the mayor stated

"education just exudes from people who are enthusiastic. This district needs success.

New School helps the district be successful" (p.A5). The only school board member who

voted against considering the school's closure addressed his colleagues by stating:

> As school directors, it seems to me we should be applauding these people. We
>
> should be finding ways to support them. In New School, the school district has a
>
> gem, which should be polished and shown off to the world as an exemplary

program. Let's tell them now they can stop worrying. Let's not make them wait

another six weeks with this hanging over all our heads ("Alumni Make Appeal for

New School", 1993, p.A5).

After the board member's fiery remarks, the article (1993) reported that the audience

gave him a standing ovation. After much thought, consideration, and budget cuts in other

areas of the district's budget, the board of directors voted to keep the alternative school

open at its board meeting on Tuesday, April 21, 1993 (McDonough, 2007).

New School Today: 2004-2005

The district's website (2005) stated New School's mission was to "provide

students with the necessary information, knowledge, materials, skills and support to

increase their academic performance by addressing both their academic and social-

adaptive needs." New School's philosophy, also included on the site, was that "students

are a success story in the making, with the faculty and staff operating as agents of hope."

(2005). The school continued to operate on the general premise that "when given the

opportunity all students can learn and succeed." General faculty sentiment for New

School could best be summed up in the words of one teacher who noted that New School

provided "an alternative for students who couldn't succeed in a regular education

setting." The principal added that the school "provides students with a well rounded

education and gives them employable skills to allow them to become productive

members of society." By this time the faculty had increased to one teacher per subject

area. The academic subjects included English, reading, mathematics, social studies,

science, health and physical education and special education, while the vocational

courses featured business, childcare, horticulture, and technology. Along with a lead teacher, there were two additional counselors, two part-time nurses and a librarian.

New Programs at New School

By 2004-2005, New School offered several innovative programs for its now approximately one hundred fifty students. While the school retained its secondary program for students in grades nine through twelve and this program remained the largest in size, the Expectant Mother's Program, now called the Expectant and Teen Parent Program, was joined by the new programs the CARE program and the Extended Day program. The CARE or Creative Affective Remedial Education program located on the school's lower level was attended by district students in kindergarten through eighth grade who displayed severe behavioral problems at their home elementary or middle school. These students matriculated in the CARE program for one year before transitioning back to their home school. The Extended Day program was targeted for the district's expelled students in grades six through twelve. These students received academic instruction at New School from three to six p.m. on Monday through Thursday and engaged in community service or employment activities during normal school hours and on Fridays (Brochure, 2004).

New School Students: Who They Are and What They Need

According to *School Matters* (2005), New School's student body comprised 148 students in 2004-2005. Their academic abilities ranged from above grade level to significantly below grade level in core subject areas such as reading and mathematics. Many had failed numerous courses in middle or high school; consequently, they were referred to the alternative school where it was hoped that they could flourish in a smaller

setting with more individualized attention from teachers. The program likely appealed to other students because it allowed them to attend the vocational shops or technical school or participate in the co-op program rather than focusing on academics for the entire school day. Some students came to the school because they were pregnant. Others were special education students who were either mainstreamed into one or more academic courses or remained in the resource room for all of their academic subjects. There were a significant number of students with chronic attendance and truancy issues, while many students faced challenging home situations. A number of the students were in foster care and others lived in a group home. As a result, these students were often labeled and ostracized by students at Traditional High School when they attended that institution. Other students came from extremely dysfunctional families and might have one or both parents incarcerated, deceased or in mental institutions. Some students were emancipated and had to support themselves, both financially and emotionally. What each group of students shared was an at-risk classification and a need for an alternative school placement sensitive to their special needs and circumstances.

The faculty was in agreement that New School's student population viewed the alternative school as a new start. As one faculty member noted:

> these students were young people who chose or were directed to New School as a second chance so they could start with a clean slate. Our kids view this program as a new beginning, a place were they won't be judged and a place where they can get the help they need both academically and personally. This is not a punishment or a prison sentence. New School is an alternative to what wasn't working in their lives and in their education.

No one on the faculty felt that New School was a behavioral school for students with severe disciplinary issues. According to the district's 2003-2004 *Report Card* (2004), 87% of New School students did not have any discipline referrals.

New School Attendance Incentives: A Positive Addition

The small number of students who lived in the two townships that bordered the district were offered transportation to and from school. However, the majority of students lived in the borough, within a two and a half mile radius of the school, and was required to walk to school or find their own transportation. This rule likely contributed to truancy issues for students who chose to stay home in inclement weather rather than walk to school. Although the district's 2003-2004 *Report Card* (2004) stated that the average daily attendance at New School was 67.3%, on inclement weather days school attendance dropped to 40%.

In an effort to improve attendance, the school implemented an attendance rewards program during the 2004-2005 school year. Students had the opportunity to earn a reward each marking period for good attendance. These rewards included field trips to places such as an all-you-can-eat restaurant, roller skating rink, bowling alley, zoo, snow-tubing resort and amusement park. Because the students were involved in helping to choose these rewards, it was hoped that they would also be motivated to attain them. Each marking period, the reward became more difficult to earn because better attendance was expected than that which was considered exemplary the prior quarter. Additionally, students were eligible to participate in intramural sports at New School based on their attendance. The school even had attendance pep-rallies. While the students were

challenged by the attendance rewards program, it was hoped that they also would gain a

sense of pride regarding the strides they made in this area.

As one teacher noted, the program was a "huge incentive for the student body that

helped them address weaknesses and opened doors for students to new experiences they

never had." Reflecting on some of the opportunities the attendance rewards program

afforded the students, another faculty member who chaperoned several field trips

recalled:

> If it weren't for this attendance program, our kids probably wouldn't go
>
> snowtubing on Blue Mountain or see Longwood Gardens or go to the Wetlands.
>
> Some of them have never even been outside Philadelphia because no one in their
>
> lives views enrichment like that as a priority. Nobody cares enough or can't afford
>
> to take them so they aren't exposed to things like this outside of school. It's
>
> another way our school lets our kids know that we care because we're doing
>
> things with them that we'd do with our own biological kids.

Another faculty member added:

> They want to come to school because they love the praise they get when they
>
> succeed. The students are having fun competing against one another and against
>
> themselves to see how much they can improve their attendance. I'm proud of
>
> them and I think they're proud of themselves.

Overall, the faculty credited the attendance rewards program for making a positive

impact on the student body. By the end of the 2004-2005 school year, the district's New

School report card (2005) stated that the school's attendance rate was 72.4%, an increase

from 67.2% the previous school year.

New School students were bound by many of the same conventions that governed the student experience at Traditional High. New School students abided by the district's high school code of discipline and passed a discipline code test at the beginning of each school year. They were also assessed according to the same traditional grading scale as Traditional High students and were required to take a district-created assessment called a PSSA Snapshot each marking period. Snapshots were given in reading and math courses in an effort to prepare students for the eleventh grade PSSA test in those subject areas. Additionally, New School students had the opportunity to participate in all Traditional High School activities, such as extracurricular clubs, intramurals, sports, dances, banquets, proms, homecoming, and graduation.

What Makes New School Different

New School featured several non-programmatic attributes that made it different from the traditional, comprehensive high school in the district. In particular, these differences were most evident in New School's family-centered approach to education, its out-reach efforts to parents and guardians, and its service learning component. While discussed here as separate approaches, these three were, in fact, highly interrelated.

Family-Centered Approach to Education

In general, New School faced an uphill battle to win the support of the parents and guardians of its students. Frequently, because of their child's poor grades, attendance, numerous suspensions, or negative experiences with district faculty or administration, the parents or guardians of at-risk students became frustrated with or felt disenfranchised from school. Often carrying baggage from their own less-than-favorable experiences in school, some parents or guardians refrained from participating in their child's education.

Some worked several jobs or had work hours that conflicted with the dates and times set for conferences or monthly Parents' Club meetings held at the school. In an effort to reconnect with these parents, New School instituted what can best be characterized as a family approach to education. These efforts were designed to convey the New School faculty's genuine concern for the success of their students.

This "family approach" was given its most full expression in the school's Open House celebration held in September where it was not simply stated, it was enacted. New School invited the students and their families to the school not only for a tour and classroom visits but for dinner as well. To set the family tone, the students and their parents or guardians were treated to a lasagna dinner and dessert prior to the traditional Open House activities. This calm, enjoyable, non-threatening approach motivated students and their families, some of whom did not have fond memories of school or anything associated with it, to attend the Open House. A New School faculty member described Open House:

> When people sit down and eat together it breaks down walls. It's not I'm the teacher and you're the parent or the student. It's we're just people enjoying a meal. You can't have a fork in one hand and a roll book or a red pen in another. We're just people. Food kind of levels the playing field and makes people feel comfortable.

In reference to the unique format of New School's Open House, another teacher added:

> You talk about sports or the weather or something normal, not school because school has been difficult for the last I don't know how many years for a lot of our

kids and their parents. So this kind of breaks the ice so we can get to know a little about each other and keep things positive and uplifted and when we do go into the classrooms to talk about the real stuff, people aren't so defensive and scared. Then when you touch base with them later on in the school year, they're more likely to understand that we're all on the same page and we genuinely want what's best for their child. That's what it's really all about. I can't think of who it was that said they don't care how much you know until they know how much you care. That's really what it is, bottom line.

The faculty overwhelmingly agreed that the Open House gesture conveyed to parents as well as students that this school was very different.

Directly related to the Open House gathering was the institution of the Senior Breakfast. Although the alternative school students participated in Traditional High School's graduation ceremonies, New School honored its seniors in its own way at the end of each year. Just as the school year began with an open house that allowed the entire school family to break bread together, it ended with the Senior Breakfast for seniors, their families, the school's administration, faculty and staff. The district's board members, central administrators and other principals were also invited to attend the festivities. If there were a senior who was not represented by a parent or guardian for whatever reason, that senior was represented by a faculty member who adopted the role of parent or guardian and acknowledged the student's achievements.

The faculty described the breakfast as an opportunity to make their seniors feel special. A teacher recalled the Senior Breakfast:

We willingly organize the breakfast and get here at the crack of dawn to cook all the food and then we serve the food because our kids deserve it. These are the kids that some decided would never make it and now here they are ready to receive a diploma that they earned when all of the odds were against them. The breakfast is our chance as their school family to say to them you made it, you're special and we're so proud of you. It's really important for us and to us to let them know that they matter.

Another faculty member added:

The Senior Breakfast is not impersonal or ceremonial. We sit down and eat and tell our kids how proud we are of them. We reminisce about funny things that happened over the course of the year and discuss their future plans. Parents tell us how much they appreciate our program and all that we've done for their child. A lot of times there are tears because some parents really never believed they would see this day. I've been told by numerous parents over the years that their child is the first person in their family to get a diploma. It really makes you feel good because you and the program really made a difference. There are lots of hugs and handshakes and it's a memorable day.

At the conclusion of the breakfast, the seniors donned their caps and gowns as they proceeded into the all-purpose room to *Pomp and Circumstance* for the school's annual Awards Assembly. The room was filled with the student body, family and friends, administration, faculty and staff and invited district guests. Although the underclassmen also received awards, the seniors were spotlighted. Some of these students were the first in their immediate and sometimes even extended families to earn a high school diploma.

Others overcame a history of failure and other obstacles in an effort to graduate. Several faculty reported the underclassmen in attendance often commented that seeing their fellow students *make it* gave them hope, strength and the motivation to follow in their footsteps. The faculty believed the seniors' success sent their peers the powerful message that they also could be successful.

Reaching Out to Parents and Guardians: On Paper and in Person

New School administrators and faculty reported making concerted efforts to contact parents or guardians in order to show that they cared about the welfare and progress of the student body. These contacts took multiple forms: some were made in writing, some verbally, and some even in person at the student's residence. Overwhelmingly, the parents or guardians were elated to hear positive comments and extremely grateful for phone calls or messages relayed via voice mail or email. The New School teachers contacted parents through positive postcards. Because teachers found that students tended to destroy mail bearing the school's return address before their parents or guardians could open it, the alternative school sent non-threatening, positive postcards that students could read and would want to show their families. As one teacher recounted:

> Students and parents often tell us that they keep those postcards on their
> refrigerators for months. They are not used to positive interaction from schools
> so even though they are kind of shocked, they are really happy that we took the
> time to share something good about their child.

Overall, the faculty agreed that their efforts to reach out to parents and guardians were well received and perceived as genuine.

The school's efforts at outreach extended to making home visits. For example, if a student were consecutively absent or there were behavioral issues that needed to be dealt with, the principal, lead teacher, or one of the other counselors or teachers would visit the student's home to deliver missed assignments or discuss the matter. The lead teacher shared:

> Sometimes our visits are planned and sometimes parents are not expecting us. When we show up it is because we care and we're willing to go out of our way to reach you. Making a house call could be necessary for a number of different reasons but it sends a loud and clear message to the parent that their child matters and we are about the business of making sure their child succeeds. You have those times when no one is home or someone is home but realizes it's us and won't come to the door. But then you have the visits when you end up staying longer than you intended to because you're able to share information about various services that are available within the community that will help not only the student but the family as a whole.

The faculty agreed that parents and guardians usually appreciated their efforts and were surprised that school personnel would go out of their way for their child.

Service Learning: Rewarding for All Involved

Although New School placed a great deal of emphasis on family and made efforts to bridge the gap between the school and the home, the school also tried to instill in its students that a sense of family also meant giving back to others. To that end, the students were provided opportunities to participate in service learning, both in-house and outside New School.

The Big Brothers/Big Sisters program was one of New School's *in-house* service learning activities. The high school students served as "bigs" to the younger CARE program students in kindergarten through fifth grade. Every Friday, the "bigs" and their "littles" engaged in arts and crafts activities in the classroom, participated in games in the all-purpose room, or went on field trips. One faculty member recounted:

> Service learning is huge. It's an integral part of their education and what we do here. When the kids volunteer to interact with the younger children it matters. They know that someone looks up to them and is counting on them to be there and do the right things. It helps build the self-esteem of the bigs and the littles. They feel special because someone thinks they're special. It's inspirational for me as a teacher to watch the students interact with each other on such a positive level.

The faculty described Friday as a day that some students with truancy issues tended to skip, but knowing their absence would disappoint their "little" was an incentive for them to be present. Overall, the New School faculty responded that service learning mattered to their students.

New School students also participated in service activities that benefited members of the community outside New School. For example, the student body participated in Pennies for Patients, an annual campaign that encouraged each New School homeroom to collect money to benefit children with cancer. In addition, the school served the community through its Thanksgiving canned food drive, winter coat drive and fall Clean-up Day when students, their families and school personnel picked up trash and beautified the school grounds by planting shrubs and flowers and spreading mulch. New School

students also volunteered at the local State Hospital. When students participated in the State Hospital's winter carnival to aid patients with their physical fitness activities, the hospital's volunteer coordinator thanked the chaperoning teacher and said, "we got so many good feedbacks and compliments for you and the students. Your kids were outstanding! Your support really made and saved our day. Thanks again." In addition, the New School faculty member who chaperoned the service learning activity commented, "the students represent us and the program well and this was truly the best teaching day I've had this school year." Overall teachers were consistent in reporting that the service activities strengthened the school climate and bound students and teachers together.

New School's family-centered approach to education, efforts made to reach out to parents and guardians, and service learning appeared to build a sense of community at New School among students, parents and guardians, faculty, staff, and administration.

2005-2006: Corrective Action, Change is on the Horizon

Because of repeated years of poor performance on the PSSA and failure to meet Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals, Traditional High School was assigned to Corrective Action status in 2005-2006. This required the district to seek assistance from an outside agency to revamp the high school in an effort to increase PSSA scores. These changes had consequences for and ultimately altered the structure of New School as well.

As a result of Traditional's "corrective action" status, the school board and central administration decided that major reform was necessary. According to a local newspaper article , entitled "District Passes Action Plan" (2005), "as the school enters the corrective action status under adequate yearly progress (AYP) guidelines, academics, graduation rate and school climate must improve" (p. A1). The district's action plan

addresses immediate goals and newly implemented strategies for increasing

attendance, getting math and reading scores up on the Pennsylvania System of

School Assessment exams for all students and using its family advocacy program

to pick up where the regular school day leaves off (*The Times Herald*, 2005,

November 26, p. A6).

Additionally, the newspaper article noted the "areas of concern at the high school

exist in graduation rate, proficiency goals for reading and math, particularly in subgroups

of special education, lower income and black students, and school climate for black

students" (p. A1).

The district then entered into a partnership with the Institute for Research and

Reform in Education (IRRE), an agency that targeted secondary schools in urban areas

throughout the country and specialized in systemic reform, research-based standards, and

data-driven change. According to a local newspaper article (2005) entitled "Plunging into

School Change: Traditional High Students, Staff Adjust to Sweeping New Program," the

district "signed on with First Things First a year ago to overhaul the high school this year

and the middle school next year. Parents were skeptical- no other school district in this

region had adopted this approach" (p. B5).

IRRE offered a reform framework, First Things First, which was being

implemented in school districts across the United States at the time of this study. At this

time, First Things First was in Kansas City, Kansas, Riverview Gardens Missouri,

Greenville and Shaw, Mississippi, Houston, Austin and Rio Grande, Texas, Kansas City,

Missouri, Norristown, Pennsylvania, Orange and Elizabeth, New Jersey, the New Jersey

State Department of Education, Milwaukee, Wisconsin, Los Angeles, California and New

York City. According to IRRE's website, in each of these school districts, at least fifty percent of the students were eligible for free and reduced lunch. Additionally, at least sixty percent of the students in each district were of color. The article went on to note that, in 2005-2006, the total number of students in the school district used in the current research was 1,950. In this district, fifty percent of the district's students were African American, thirty-three percent were Caucasian, thirteen percent were Latino/Hispanic, and two percent were Asian. When the First Things First reform made its debut in Kansas City, it did not receive a warm welcome. According to Hendrie (2005), members of the teachers' union were skeptical about the merits of First Things First and angry because the district decided to implement the reform without consulting the union. However, the Hendrie article reported that the reform had a positive impact at the high school level on graduation rates, attendance, student engagement, and test scores. Much of the progress made in Kansas City was attributed to the reform's longevity in the school system. The reform was clearly not an overnight fix; it required commitment and dedication over time in order for a district to see results.

The stated goal of the First Things First reform was to help students at all academic levels gain the skills to succeed in post-secondary education and careers. The reform intended to strengthen relationships between students and faculty, improve engagement, alignment, and rigor in classrooms, and allocate resources including budget, staff, and space. First Things First incorporated instructional improvement, small learning communities, and family advocacy to help districts meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind. The agency also offered technical assistance to address district-level development and support, school structural and functional issues and instructional

improvement. Additionally, the reform had its own literacy curriculum designed to improve the language arts skills of struggling readers who were two to four years below grade level.

First Things First Restructures Traditional

Instead of remaining one large high school attended by nearly two thousand students, First Things First divided Traditional High School into small learning communities. According to a local newspaper article (2005)

> when the education gurus visited Traditional High School, where a broad
> band of students was doing well but an even larger swath needed help fast,
> they had one piece of advice. Jump right in. Reorganize the school into
> small learning communities they said. Order up a new curriculum. Double
> the length of classes. Ask the teachers to be mentors to students and on
> good terms with their parents. And they said, do it all at once, not in dribs
> and drabs over several years. Make the place sizzle; a stretched out game
> plan likely would fizzle. So in September, Traditional High School took
> the plunge into what educators call whole-school restructuring. ("Plunging
> Into School Change," 2005, p.B1).

A Traditional physics teacher and former president of the local teachers' union said that teachers backed the large-scale effort. He asserted, "We have tried smaller reforms before. There was a lot of talk, talk, talk, but we'd never get around to implementing it. And there was credibility to First Things First" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, November 7, 2005, p. B5).

The goal of First Things First was straightforward: "to help students at all academic levels gain the skills to succeed in post-secondary education and good jobs," according to the website of the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, (2005) and First Things First's parent organization. In Kansas City, Kansas, it was reported that students not only improved academically, but schools began to meet the standards of No Child Left Behind. Like schools in Kansas City, Traditional High School also needed to do something about its test scores as can be noted in Table 1.

Table 1

Traditional High School 2005 PSSA Scores

	Reading	Math
Advanced	26%	17%
Proficient	27%	24%
Basic	17%	16%
Below Basic	30%	43%

As evidenced in Table 1, according to 2005 PSSA data, about half of Traditional's students were at grade level in reading and 41% were at grade level in math, a disturbingly high number of students, 30% in reading and 43% in math, scored below basic, the lowest rung on the PSSA scale. While a larger percentage of Traditional's juniors scored below basic in math than in reading, the district's goal was to significantly increase scores in both subject areas.

Consequently, Traditional looked to programs that could lead to improvements in student achievement, attendance, and graduation rates and that had some evidence of

success already. An independent evaluation showed that First Things First had significant effects on student achievement in Kansas City Schools. A local newspaper article entitled "District Passes Action Plan" (2005) also reported restructuring had reduced ethnic and economic achievement gaps in reading, a major federal education goal.

Traditional High Implements Small Learning Communities

In fall 2005, small learning communities debuted at Traditional High School in "an effort to improve the experience for a generation of young people who will need high quality math, science and problem-solving skills to compete with their peers around the globe" (*The Philadelphia Inquirer*, 2005, November 7, p. B1). The small learning communities were structured around the areas of business and finance, engineering and technology, health sciences, law and criminal justice, performing arts and visual arts.

According to a local newspaper article "Plunging Into School Change: Traditional High Students, Staff Adjust to Sweeping New Program" (2005), the whole school restructuring involved sweeping changes with new schedules, new rooms, new lesson plans, and new obligations that required teachers to reinvent the high school experience for Traditional's students who cane from the borough and the middle-class suburbs that surrounded the municipality. Traditional's principal asserted,

> There are virtually no people in this building doing what they did a year
> ago. It has been an immersion, if you will. We need to slow down and be
> sure we are good at these new things. And I can say this: Everybody goes
> home tired on Fridays. ("Plunging Into School Change", 2005, p.B5).

For many teachers and other staff, the challenges of the new school year were exhausting. The coordinator of Traditional's school-improvement initiative stated "our

teachers have been overwhelmed with change. It is very hard. You can hear their frustrations but the teachers get all the credit for stepping up and doing this work" ("Plunging Into School Change: Traditional high Students, Staff, Adjust to Sweeping New Program", 2005, p. B5). Additionally, the president of Traditional's parent teacher association reported that "some parents have voiced concerns, particularly about whether their child can transfer to a different small learning community" (p. B5).

First Things First required participating districts to strictly adhere to its criteria. In addition to the establishment of Traditional's six small learning communities, a seventh small learning community focused on "credit recovery" was also mandated. As the 2005-06 school year commenced, the district decided that "credit recovery" would be New School's new mission. This seventh small learning community would be attended primarily by tenth grade students who failed either reading or mathematics as ninth graders.

2005-2006 A "New" New School: Sweeping Changes Usurp the Program

In addition to restructuring Traditional High School, the First Things First reform had a major impact on New School. While New School's administration, faculty, and staff considered themselves flexible and well acquainted with change, most found it difficult to accept the sweeping changes brought by the First Things First reform. Ultimately, while the building was still physically present, the alternative school, in philosophy, theory, and practice, ceased to exist. As was the case since its inception, New School was being required to reinvent itself to meet the needs of the district. The First Things First reform drastically altered New School's mission, course offerings, and

student population and held the potential to negatively impact the school's hopes of reaching AYP.

A Solely Academic Mission

As the 2005-2006 school year commenced, New School's mission had been redirected and now was focused entirely on academics and credit recovery. According to the district website (2005), the goal of New School was to "provide students with the necessary information, knowledge, materials, skills and support to increase their academic performance." The New School 2005-2006 School Improvement Plan (2005) changed as well, indicating the school's mission was now "to help students achieve success in a core academic curriculum." The vision, also included in the School Improvement Plan, became "to provide students with the necessary information, knowledge, skills, materials, and support to increase academic performance and assist students in becoming responsible and productive citizens." Thus, the primary tasks of New School required by First Things First and echoed and reinforced by both the school board and central administration became readying credit deficient students for graduation and increasing PSSA scores. That basically meant that New School had one year to facilitate two years of instruction in order for students to return to Traditional High School with the necessary skills to perform well on the PSSA.

The Elimination of Vocational Courses

Changes in course offerings and faculty teaching assignments were directly related to New School's new mission. The following table compares New School's faculty and courses prior to and after the implementation of the First Things First reform.

Table 2

New School Courses and Faculty

Subject/Area	# of faculty 2004-05	# of faculty 2005-06
Principal	1	1
Lead teacher	1	1
Counselor	3	3
English	1	1
Math	1	2
Phys ed/health	1	1
Reading	1	1
Science	1	2
Social studies	1	2
Special education	1	1
Business shop	1	0
Childcare shop	1	0
Horticulture shop	1	0
Technology shop	1	0
CARE program	2	2
Expectant and Teen Parent program	1	1
Librarian	1	0

Clearly the area most devastated was the vocational as all shop courses were eliminated from the program. The librarian's position was also eliminated. Because of the school's now singular focus on academics, additional teachers in the subject areas of mathematics, science, and social studies were added to the program. The librarian and one of the school's vocational teachers were transferred to other schools within the district. The changes at New School forced another vocational shop teacher to leave the district and seek employment elsewhere. However, due to dual certification, one vocational teacher was able to remain at New School and teach an academic course. As one faculty member commented regarding the impact the elimination of the vocational shops would have on the New School students:

Now students who aren't college bound won't have the opportunity to

gain needed skills. Not only that, but this will definitely have an impact

on the students self-esteem because the shops were places our students

could excel. They like hands-on stuff. They're good at it. Of course they

need the academics too, I'm not saying they don't but we always had a

balance between the two here and now that's gone for good.

Another teacher noted with concern that, "The elimination of the vocational courses was a disappointment that will do a disservice to the program."

Changes in Student Population

The First Things First reform caused New School's student population to change in numerous ways. Ninth graders were no longer permitted to attend New School; all freshmen were required to attend Traditional High School regardless of their at-risk status. In addition to the credit deficient tenth graders, Traditional High School sent juniors and seniors that were credit deficient as well. A small percentage (13%) of the students traditionally served by New School was permitted to remain at the school.

Table 3

New School Demographics 2005-2006

Student Group	*N* of students	% of students
All	105	100%
Tenth graders	48	46%
Eleventh & Twelfth graders	57	54%
Male	57	54%
Female	48	46%
African American	83	79%
Caucasian	18	17%
Latino/Hispanic	4	4%
Economically Disadvantaged	54	51%
IEP	13	12%

During the 2005-2006 school year, New School had slightly more eleventh and twelfth grade students than tenth graders. While there were slightly more male students than female students, the school's student body was predominately African-American and economically disadvantaged. In 2006, the School Matters website (2006) reported New School's demographics. The majority, 79%, of New School's student population was African American, 17% of the students were Caucasian, and 4% of the population was Hispanic. Additionally, the website noted that over half of New School's students, 51%, were economically disadvantaged in 2006, (see Table 3). While this percentage was lower than 56.1%, the percentage of economically disadvantaged students in the district, it was still significantly higher than 31.4%, the number of economically disadvantaged students in Pennsylvania.

Issues Arising from the Reform

Accompanying the First Things First reform were several issues that greatly affected New School. These challenges included block scheduling, student resistance, Family Advocacy, and the implementation of two small learning communities.

Block Scheduling: A Daunting Structural Change

With the focus of the school now solely on academics, New School quickly lost its alternative school identity. Students were engaged in academic courses the entire day and required to attend four 84-minute blocks of academic work per day. Although district high school teachers received professional development training on how to vary assignments and assessments when using block scheduling, many New School teachers found the implementation of the block structure daunting. As one teacher noted:

> Sure they trained us in August before the year actually started but it was very brief and too textbook, it really didn't address the challenges we're facing right now. Where's our additional training and resources? Where is First Things First now that we're struggling?

While the techniques and ideas presented by First Things First had merit and were embraced by some students, others appeared to be overwhelmed by the length of the eighty-four minute blocks and the number of courses they were required to take. Not surprisingly, many students became extremely frustrated. For instance, if their reading or math levels were low, they were often anxious about attending these courses initially. As a result, they usually reached their frustration point rather early into the block. Another teacher reported:

They're so frustrated you can't get them to focus. You take students who don't

have the academic stamina to withstand forty-minute periods and then you give

them eighty-four minutes. Even if you divide up the block and try to do different

things to stimulate their interest, most of the time they still shut you out.

The school's lead teacher commented:

I feel for the classroom teachers. They need students, kids who want to learn, not

kids who are forced to be here and fight them tooth and nail when their goal is

only to support them so that they can recover the credits they're deficient. The

block scheduling has been brutal given the student population we now have.

While teacher trepidation and unhappiness were somewhat assuaged by the ongoing

professional development and support offered by First Things First, nothing was in place

to placate student discontent which manifested in many ways.

One consequence of this change was that the majority of New School's new

student population did not feel connected to or valued by the program. Since many of

these students were forced to attend New School, they resented their placement, felt

stigmatized, and were resistant to what the credit recovery program could offer them. As

a result, many were extremely negative and exhibited disciplinary problems.

Additionally, there was no longer enough time for things, such as service learning or

student council activities. The number of field trips decreased and the attendance

incentive program waned. As one of the teachers noted, in the past, such activities

"unified the school and enabled New School students and teachers to bond and develop a

rapport."

Taking matters into their own hands, students began arriving at school so late that they missed an entire block or course without a note written by a parent or guardian excusing their tardiness. Others avoided attending their afternoon courses by cutting school at the conclusion of their lunch period. Still others skipped the entire school day several times a week. Some students walked out of class and sat in New School's Time Out Room also known as in-school suspension. Others engaged in disrespectful speech or actions with other students and teachers in order to be sent to the Time Out Room during that block or to receive in-school suspension for one or more days. One faculty member who was previously employed by a correctional facility reported:

> What I see here regarding behavioral issues is reminiscent of a prison where the
> goal is and people compete to be labeled the meanest or most disruptive. There is
> no regard for the feelings of others or the chaos that their actions cause. We've a
> multitude of students with behavioral issues and the negative peer pressure
> and the acting out is what you see. It's really a shame.

The lead teacher who handled discipline asserted:

> I am so busy this year. We have had a major increase in discipline referrals. It's
> to the point where I can have a student written up one block for something and the
> next block another teacher writes up the same student. I've also seen this year
> that teachers have so many write-ups in one day that they have to jot down notes
> about each incident so that they can remember exactly what happened. We
> haven't had that in the past. I've sat with some of the disruptive students and
> tried to counsel them but there is deep resentment and underlying anger about this
> building and their placement here. They don't care about the suspensions. I'm

trying to get the students to be responsible for their own actions. When they reach

my office, I try to get students to realize that everything they do, positive and

negative, impacts their credits and graduation but I don't even think some of them

want a diploma.

Contrary to the mission outlined in New School's Improvement Plan and the district's

website, a teacher reported:

Our mission on paper is not what we really became. We became a discipline

school under the guise of being an academic recovery program. Because

Traditional's students were forced to come here and had no say so, they viewed

their placement as a punishment. It was like we were the jailers. We got the kids

that Traditional did not want to deal with.

While New School teachers were familiar with such behavior, they reported an explosion

of disciplinary incidents during the 2005-06 school year.

Along with student discipline, the family atmosphere that once permeated the

school also quickly faded along with the rapport among students and teachers. In part,

this was due to increased class sizes and the fact that many students deeply resented their

placement at New School and desperately longed to return to Traditional High School.

Because many of the tenth grade students did not *buy into* the program or care that it

offered an opportunity to erase their credit deficiency, they constantly criticized the

program with their misbehavior as the most outward sign of their disapproval. Many of

the eleventh and twelfth graders expressed their dislike for the new program through

passive resistance. They physically attended class but failed to complete assignments,

refused to submit homework, or slept.

While the First Things First reform required New School to participate in Family Advocacy, its implementation was no easy task. According to The Institute of Research and Reform in Education (2004), the goals of the Family Advocate System were to build a positive relationship between each student and his/her advocate, between each advocate and each student's family, and among students in the advocate group. Finally, the system was designed to build collaborative relationships among school staff who shared responsibility for student success. The First Things First reform viewed learning as a team effort involving students, their families, and school staff. The purpose of the Family Advocacy program was to build a strong foundation for each student to bridge the gap between home and school in an effort to increase student achievement. Gambone et al., (2002) reported that advocates were "school staff who care about students and their families, stay aware of their students' progress, act as champions for their students, provide a bridge from school to home and serve as primary contacts for families" (p.17).

In October 2005, teachers were randomly assigned as advocates to approximately fifteen students. Because it was too early in the year for teachers to know their students well or to have developed any type of rapport with them, many students resented Family Advocacy. As a result, New School teachers experienced something quite far from the ideal scenario Connell and Broome had described. As one teacher explained,

> We always informally did advocacy here but now First Things First forced us to
>
> do it and most of the kids are totally resistant. The positive connection we had
>
> with students and parents is gone so now you rarely can have any positive
>
> interaction. The kids think you're in their business when you try to do your job as

their advocate because they really don't see us as that. If they don't let us in, we

really can't help them.

Some students chose not to participate in Family Advocacy by being absent each

Wednesday when it was scheduled or arriving so late on Wednesday morning that the

Family Advocacy period was completed. Other faculty reported that some of the students

who attended refused to engage in the activities or to allow their advocate to check with

them regarding any difficulties they might be having at school, at work or at home.

Not only were students resistant to the program and the faculty, they were

resistant to one another. Although students still traveled in groups or classes for their

academic courses and were together the entire day, the groups did not seem to bond. The

teachers agreed that for the most part, students refused to work with their classmates on

cooperative learning tasks or group projects, while others took this resistance a step

further and engaged in physical altercations in classrooms, hallways, during lunch or after

school. Although New School teachers were familiar with the types of behaviors students

chose to exhibit that year, they felt that the reform fueled the negativity that often seemed

to permeate the school.

Two Small Learning Communities Result in one Fractured, Disappointed Faculty

Because of the imposed scheduling changes, the New School teachers who once

functioned as a cohesive, extremely close-knit faculty were divided into two teams: small

learning community "A" and small learning community "B." Small learning community

"A" taught the tenth grade credit recovery students, while small learning community "B"

taught the juniors and seniors. Teachers within each small learning community shared a

common planning time and were required to attend scheduled, formal small learning community meetings at least once a week.

Because the schedules of the two small learning communities' were not in sync, the faculty became balkanized and did not have time to meet as a whole even during lunch. Since there was one academic teacher per subject area in each small learning community, it was difficult for teachers in the same content area to share curricular information, such as lesson plans or ideas, with one another. While the teachers reported stealing moments here and there before or after school in the hallways, restrooms, or classrooms to discuss important information, they longed for more quality time together. As one teacher explained:

> First Things First took a cohesive group and fractured it. They split us up. We're now split between kids, we don't know the kids on the other team because we don't teach them. It really impacts the climate of the school and limits the interaction. Teachers don't know the kids, kids don't know the teachers. I definitely don't think this is a change for the better.

Another faculty member added:

> Now when we want to plan lessons together with the teacher who teaches the same subject on the other team, we can't because our schedules don't mesh. It's like you email info to each other and try to touch base that way but the new schedule isn't conducive to allowing us to work collaboratively.

As noted above, morale waned. The faculty's upbeat nature and humor that were previously hallmarks of the school were replaced by frustration and unhappiness. Although the teachers were professionals with a task before them and the determination

to tackle it, many sensed defeat. They were cognizant that central administration and the board of directors expected them to complete their task successfully, yet they wondered if any of those stakeholders were aware of the enormity of the difficulties they faced.

The Reform's Impact on the PSSA

While New School students continued to participate in Traditional High School's graduation ceremonies and to earn a diploma bearing that name, in the eyes of the First Things First reform and the state AYP demands, the schools remained separate entities much to the detriment of New School. In effect, the First Things First reform plan removed a significant number of failing students who were likely to fare poorly on the PSSA and placed them at New School. This left Traditional High School with students who were likely to perform well on the PSSA and enable the school to reach its AYP goals. New School, on the other hand, was at a severe disadvantage. The school had an even larger number of new students who lacked the necessary skills or motivation to score well on the PSSA. While Traditional's scores had the potential to increase significantly, New School's scores had the potential to plummet.

During the 2005-06 school year, the first year of the reform effort, New School tested fewer than 10 students in reading and mathematics because although many of Traditional's former students attended high school for three years, they did not have enough credits to warrant junior classification. Many had not even taken the foundation courses that upperclassmen normally took. Therefore, New School only administered the PSSA to students who were credited as juniors. Thus, fewer than 10 students were tested. Consequently, in an effort to maintain confidentiality of those students' results, the state did not publicly report New School's AYP results. While the school received Making

Progress status, assessment percentages for each subgroup were unavailable from the Pennsylvania Department of Education.

New School Faculty Responses to the Reform

The principal and lead teacher supplied significant support and reassurance to their distressed faculty. The principal often placed personal, handwritten notes of encouragement or thank you notes in the teachers' mailboxes. New School's principal described her faculty as

> the most cohesive, authentic, caring, bright, dedicated staff I have ever worked with. You cannot even fathom the hours of time these teachers put in doing lesson planning and curriculum work and the emotional energy they put in. This faculty makes it its' mission to build up students that are success stories in the making but sometimes haven't been given a chance.

New School teachers reported that, at least once a month, their principal purchased doughnuts for the faculty and provided refreshments or lunch. She also verbally reminded the faculty that she believed they were doing a commendable and outstanding job. The faculty said the principal told them on a regular basis that they were the best faculty she had ever worked with. Additionally, the lead teacher provided strategies to help address the students' behavioral issues. She scheduled numerous conferences with parents or guardians, and made phone calls and home visits when needed.

Faculty also worked to make the best of a bad situation. The teachers described the morale boosting committee created by several faculty members. The committee organized a weekly sign-up sheet for teachers to bring dessert to share and encouraged

their peers to share positive thoughts, quotes, or good news regarding their professional or personal lives via email because they lacked the opportunity to share such information in person.

While the efforts of both the administrators and the teachers had some positive impact, other teachers described the efforts as too little too late. By the end of the year, several faculty members contemplated transferring to other schools within the district. One teacher actually requested a transfer and a second was hired by another district. Overall, many of the teachers were deeply upset that the sweeping changes that accompanied the reform had such a devastating impact on the alternative school they once knew and loved. While the reform brought new textbooks and curricula to the school, it took away many of the critical components that made New School unique. All those components that had made New School a viable and successful option for students who needed a less traditional approach to education ceased to exist. At the time of this study, the district had no plans to reinstitute New School's alternative school program. The school's new task or mission would remain.

<div align="center">Summary</div>

The aforementioned portrait of New School chronicled the school's evolution from 1978 through the 2005- 2006 school year. Since its inception, New School has been continually forced to change and reinvent itself in response to shifting district needs and mandates. Ultimately, this brief history of New School's establishment and mission and the demographic picture of its student population and faculty provided the necessary context from which to assess the impact of the No Child Left Behind legislation on this alternative school and its students. Therefore, the thick, rich description within this in-

depth picture of New School serves as a critical precursor to the data analysis that follows

in chapter 5.

CHAPTER FIVE

DATA ANALYSIS

Introduction

This chapter provides an analysis of the data and the findings derived from this single case study that examined the perceptions of the teachers and administrators in an alternative school about the effect of the No Child Left Behind legislation. This analysis focuses on understanding the meaning the participants have constructed about the impact of No Child Left Behind on their alternative school and its students. In particular, the study examines participants' perceptions of the areas or functions of the alternative school most directly affected or impacted by the legislation and the responses devised to address the new challenges.

The First Things First reform effort brought significant changes to New School in 2005-2006. This year was seminal in the life of New School in that the First Things First reform irrevocably altered the mission of the alternative school.

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with the New School teachers and administrators in the later part of 2005 and ending in the early part of 2006. The data gathered from these in-depth interviews offers an understanding of the perspectives of New School teachers and administrators about the indirect impact of No Child Left Behind, especially the very direct ramifications coming from the introduction of the First Things First reform as a response to the NCLB requirements.

The respondents were all participants in New School, with the majority being teachers. Based on their experiences at New School, the respondents were asked to

address the following questions: From your perspective what has been the impact of No Child Left Behind on alternative schools? What areas do you feel have been most directly impacted or affected? From your perspective what responses might be most appropriate to address any problems or issues arising from the impact of No Child Left Behind?

The Alternative School and No Child Left Behind

Accurately or not, all of the participants clearly saw themselves as advocates for their students; putting the students' interests, wants and needs first and foremost. Additionally, the respondents' loyalty to the original philosophy of their alternative school was also evident. Yet their concerns for the "students" were so intimately tied to concerns for the school that it is difficult if not impossible to meaningfully separate the two. Keeping this in mind, the respondents perceived the changes forced upon the school as a consequence of NCLB offered at best a mixed bag for students, though more negatives were evident than positives. The perceived impact of No Child Left Behind on the alternative schools and the students was framed in the following somewhat overlapping themes; promotion of curricular equity, placing at-risk students at-risk, and the irrevocable alternation of the focus of the alternative school.

No Child Left Behind and Curricular Equity

Several participants applauded the impact of No Child Left Behind (NCLB) on the issues of curriculum equity for alternative school students. They viewed NCLB as a catalyst that forced alternative schools to focus on standards and curriculum and promote equity. As several respondents noted, some alternative schools (although not New School) served as "dumping grounds" for students who were forced to leave the traditional, mainstream schools. Once these students received the "at-risk" label, they

often no longer received the same curricular content as mainstream students. The educational equity that accompanied No Child Left Behind mandated that alternative school students receive a curriculum similar to that of their peers in more traditional educational settings.

The majority of the respondents welcomed the increased level of rigor that NCLB brought to the alternative education curriculum as well as the focus it placed on academic standards. The respondents agreed that the enhanced content that the alternative education students now receive was long overdue, especially in the critical areas of reading and mathematics. Some participants were relieved that their students are now forced to receive the same content in these subject areas as traditional education students. Therefore, No Child Left Behind was perceived as combating some of the inconsistencies and inequities associated with alternative schools and the student population served by them. This removed a good deal of the latitude that individual alternative school had in setting their own curriculum. As an administrator noted:

> One of the major impacts is that, especially in this state, there really hasn't been any set standard for what the alternative school should look like. So therefore across the state we have used the word alternative to define a number of different things and we really don't have a consensus of what it should look like or encompass.

This notion of curricular inequity also extended to the respondents' perceptions of resource inequity. From their perspective, the lack of critical resources such as monies to purchase current texts and materials plagued their alternative school for far too long. Respondents believed that No Child Left Behind forced districts to distribute resources

differently and more equitably than they had in the past. Another administrator

commented:

> This year we just started receiving new books and materials. We had things that
>
> were outdated almost twenty years. And it seemed to be okay with the district.
>
> When our district received grant money we were left out time and time again.
>
> When grants were awarded for students who had attendance issues, even though
>
> the majority of the students we deal with fit those criteria, we were never asked to
>
> share in the pie to provide incentives and motivate these students.

A social studies teacher added "no one cared about the curriculum part. Now these

students have their scores counted. So instead of getting the left over, left over, left over,

there's stuff to teach from." Seen from this aspect, NCLB was beneficial because

alternative school settings and students could no longer be overlooked and treated as

being of lesser value. The curriculum, especially the academic curriculum of the

alternative school became the main focus and as a result, resources for textbooks and

technology have greatly improved. As a school counselor stated:

> They (alternative school students) can't be shunned to the side anymore. They
>
> can't be out of sight out of mind because now they show up in a subgroup.
>
> Before they were just labeled underprivileged or not good in school or they have a
>
> rotten family life. Excuse after excuse. At least now people are taking notice of
>
> that and helping kids achieve. I think sometimes once that label is given to them
>
> it kind of allows excuses to be good enough.

> Along with the curricular improvements came instructional improvements. The

First Things First reform moved the school district to require principals to conduct

classroom observations that focused on Engagement, Alignment and Rigor or the EAR program. Principals, including New School's, were to specifically observe teachers to see if students were actively engaged in rigorous instruction in the various subject areas and that the instruction was aligned to Pennsylvania standards. The teacher respondents were unanimous in their perception that as a result of No Child Left Behind, the focus of the principal's observations became more curricular based and instructionally focused.

Placing At- Risk Students "At- Risk"

Although New School educators firmly believe that alternative school students can learn and are certainly worthy of a good education, the interviewed respondents also felt strongly that No Child Left Behind compromised their goal of meeting the needs of the whole student. As a result, they viewed NCLB as the primary reason why alternative school students may feel more defensive than ever or drop out of school entirely. One participant attributed these consequences to the focus No Child Left Behind places on high stakes tests such as the PSSA. As the language arts teacher lamented:

> It's taking time away from the things the alternative school used to be able to
> focus on like co-op, career counseling, regular counseling, vocational courses and
> service learning. These things have been taken away because we have to keep
> getting ready for the test. We have to sit and do practice testing for the state test
> and then subject the kids to quarterly district tests to prepare them for the state
> tests. So everything these alternative ed kids need they are not getting because we
> want to cram testing, testing, testing down their throat.

In terms of not addressing the needs of at-risk students, the respondents reported that another shortcoming of NCLB was the rigid approach mandated by the use of paper and pencil tests with regard to assessment. While the ideal of equity was applauded as far as curriculum was concerned, assessment was viewed quite differently. As one teacher noted:

> I believe there are many ways that kids show you that they've learned something. Just because they don't do well on a test or aren't good test takers doesn't mean that they don't know the material. No Child Left Behind doesn't really have any portfolio sections or others ways to assess these kids to see if they've made the mark and you have to cater everything to that. I think it's hard to do that to a kid and box them in.

Another teacher added:

> They can't in eleventh grade expect a kid who has been shunned aside to now magically hit the proficiency mark. It's not that they can't do things but there has to be a progression. I think one of the biggest mistakes that we make is not having these kids go to Tech. Not everybody is college material, and yes, they have to have the basic things, but I think it's just too overwhelming.

Across all respondents, the predominant desire was to see that the needs of their alternative students be met. They believe that No Child Left Behind's rigid and often unrealistic mandates did not address the unique needs of their at-risk students. The educators feared No Child Left Behind would ultimately lead to the complete demise of alternative education – leaving no room for the "alternative" in alternative education.

The Altered Focus of Alternative Schools

There was considerable unanimity across participants that No Child Left Behind is an important reason why alternative schools have become less alternative. A science teacher with over thirty years of experience in education freely admitted that he was angry that the focus of alternative education has "shifted to something other than what is meaningful for at-risk students." Another educator described the impact of No Child Left Behind as having "multiple layers." With a heavy emphasis on standardized testing, NCLB forced traditional schools to focus almost exclusively on increasing test scores, as her noted, "by any means necessary." A counselor related:

> What I've seen happen is that kids they suspect won't perform will get dumped into the alternative school setting. You can look at it as a support type of thing to get these kids up to a level where they need to be so that it makes the mainstream school look better.

There was strong agreement among the respondents that there are serious problems with a concept that can be so detrimental to alternative education students and schools. Further, a New School counselor noted:

> Often alternative schools are practically shut down because they have such low test scores. That's where, I think, if alternative schools are going to be rehabilitation for these students who are not scoring well on standardized testing, they need to be held to different levels of standards than mainstream schools. They are not playing with the same deck that the mainstream schools are playing with.

As many of the respondents see it, this practice is a "catch twenty-two" because if the government or PDE penalizes and ultimately closes alternatives schools for failure to reach Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) goals and proficiency on statewide tests, the students will either go back into the traditional education setting where failure is likely or simply end their educational career by dropping out.

The vast majority of the interviewed respondents were quite insistent that No Child Left Behind drastically changed the focus of their alternative school. They believed that the shift detracted and deviated from the alternative school's initial mission of meeting the unique needs of its student population. A majority of the respondents interviewed resented the fact that New School is now forced to view students from a narrow, academic perspective rather than a holistic one. They feared that their students lacked motivation and would ultimately drop out of school because the alternative school no longer met or at least attempted to meet their needs.

Many of the programs that made the alternative school "alternative" were eliminated in the wake of NCLB, and most particularly the First Things First Reform. The most notable of these was the vocational component of New School. Prior to NCLB, the alternative school's vocational curriculum created a "vehicle" for at-risk students to earn a high school diploma.

The school had focused on making students successful in areas that included but were not limited to academics. The respondents noted that NCLB does not take into account who alternative school students really are and what they can do. A comment from a counselor regarding alternative means of assessment is apropos.

I really think that everybody's a little bit under the gun to make the test, make the

mark, be proficient, when alternative education might have really served kids who

were never going to be proficient in an academic realm. They're proficient in

other areas and maybe in other ways of thinking and in other ways of performing

and that has merit too.

Focusing on the "whole" student is what New School was designed to do. This notion is

consistent with Howard Gardner's (2006) multiple intelligences theory that embraces the

different learning styles, individuality and creativity students possess. The respondents

did not believe that alternative students should be viewed as failures simply because they

may learn differently than other students or may need alternative types of assessments.

It was evident from their comments that their school's newly enforced academic focus

saddens, disappoints and angers both faculty and administrators.

Areas Most Directly Affected or Impacted

The participants' responses varied regarding the areas of alternative education

impacted or affected by No Child Left Behind. Overall, however, there was general

agreement that the changes in the areas of the alternative school's mission, curriculum,

and accountability were most deeply affected by NCLB.

Changes to the Mission of the Alternative School

The participants overwhelmingly believed that the way the alternative school is

now set up and what it is now designed to do has changed drastically as a result of No

Child Left Behind. Because the focus of NCLB is academic, the alternative school's

mission and structure were altered drastically. The curricular emphasis eliminated or

limited student participation in the technical school, the cooperative education program,

service learning, field trips and group and individual counseling. As a result, the respondents reported a decline in student motivation. Some feared that the drop-out rate will rise because student needs are not being met.

A science teacher recalled a time when the alternative school was more "trade oriented". He noted, "We had the shops, we had the co-op program, we had the tech school for students to go to. They were the carrots to get the students here to do the academics." He and his peers now view the alternative school as "academic oriented".

I think in the past we tried to get the students ready to go to work if that

was what they wanted to do and have work skills. Those who wanted to

go to college could still do that. Now our mission is entirely academic.

We are pushing students to prepare them for a test and there are no carrots

at all.

The aspects of alternative education that most helped students thrive are the things the participants feel NCLB has affected the most. They reported that while many students are in alternative settings as a result of academic problems, other students need this space to address other issues. An English teacher who is also a certified school counselor contended:

They are having issues because of the other stuff that happens in their lives,

whether it's home life, everyday survival, circumstances that they've been put

through, or bad experiences with education before. These are all the things we

used to be able to address and find ways to work through whether it was a totally

different educational approach where we took them out of the building and did

more things with them, things that made them feel good about themselves.

A number of these special features such as community service opportunities and field trips motivated students to give education another try. Because the respondents believed that No Child Left Behind forces alternative schools to focus on testing and preparing for testing, these special features of alternative programs were eliminated because they were not directly aligned with state standards. They contend that as a result, alternative education, as it once was known, is a thing of the past.

> Now there is not an alternative ed, we are doing the same thing as regular ed. There is no difference. We are not giving kids what they need anymore. Because of that, the attendance, I believe, is going down, and I think the drop out rate is increasing. I think No Child Left Behind is doing exactly the opposite of what it set out to do.

The participants perceived the alternative school's shift from a vocational and "whole" student approach to a singular, academic focus as having the greatest impact on their school. Reaching proficiency on statewide tests has become the overwhelming mission of the alternative school. However, although their school's mission may have changed the educators were adamant that the alternative education student has not. Herein lies the problem.

> All schools, including alternative schools, are still held accountable for standardized testing. Some kids may just not have the aptitude for it or the interest in it. Some people just know at an early age that they don't want to do something academic and they just want to do something vocational. I understand the point of view that theoretically everyone should have an academic education but it is a lot harder to motivate someone who already

knows what they want to do or don't want to do. So I think it may be a little unrealistic to expect the same type of success from the alternative school as you would from a mainstream school. You are dealing with a different demographic population.

Changes in Curriculum

Most respondents viewed No Child Left Behind and the curricular standards associated with it as the reason why the Pennsylvania Department of Education began to pay attention to alternative education. A math teacher applauded mandates that drastically increased the level of mathematics content. As a result, she noted a shift in the math content for alternative schools from a trade or vocational orientation to an academic focus. She noted:

Finally, our students are moving beyond general math skills. Sure, it's important for kids to have the basics under their belt because math skills build on each other but in addition to knowing how to balance a checkbook and figure out percentages, its finally acknowledged that many of our students go on to college, too. Now our curriculum reflects that.

In the past, New School's math content was very basic or formulaic and lacked any attention to higher order thinking skills.

The respondents recognized that reading and mathematics skills and curriculum were clearly the focus of NCLB. As one respondent noted:

No Child Left Behind as implemented in Pennsylvania focuses primarily on reading and math at the expense of other curriculums. So I think all other

curriculums have been negatively affected. And I am not ready to say that math

and reading have been positively affected.

Although most respondents agree that reading and math skills are an integral part of a

student's education, they viewed the tendency to focus solely on standards, anchors and

teaching to the test as very dangerous. One teacher summed it up nicely:

> You are only looking at certain competencies. I am not sure that you are
>
> teaching students to think and utilize the information or the strategies as
>
> opposed to testing them to show or document that they know something at
>
> that particular moment versus an ongoing utilization of what they have
>
> learned that will carry them through the course, the next course, further in
>
> their education and in life.

> Other educators echoed this view asserting that the curriculum was designed only

to prepare students for the PSSA. As a special education teacher noted:

> I will in the future be changing IEPs and making these adaptations and putting
>
> some of these algebra and geometry lessons in their goals, which I hadn't done
>
> previously. But again, I do it very reluctantly.

There was agreement that the curricular changes associated with NCLB forced an

increase in both expectations and content. However, as several respondents noted, a

number of their students are multiple years below grade level and are now taught subject

matter for which they have no background or frame of reference. One teacher added:

> Some of our students have never had a higher level math course like Algebra or
>
> Geometry let alone Algebra II in their entire high school career because they just
>
> weren't ready for it. Even if I tried to give them a crash course to so called

prepare them, it would be almost ridiculous to think that they would do well let

alone reach proficiency. It's like the odds are stacked against them because we're

really fighting an uphill battle. But, you know, we do as we're told. This is

what's on the PSSA so this is what I'll teach.

In this sense, they felt that NCLB is doing the exact opposite of what it was intended to

do. Its mandates leave behind those alternative school students, in regular and special

education, who make a concerted effort to learn to the best of their ability but who may

never reach state-determined and perhaps arbitrary proficiency levels. They believed it

was not fair for these alternative students, many of whom do not have the academic

preparation or ability necessary as a result of previous school failure or special education

status, to be subjected to high stakes testing such as the PSSA and forced to attempt to

reach proficiency.

Another teacher suggested that an integrated approach might be a beneficial way

to tackle the curricular demands of NCLB.

I think in Pennsylvania the other aspect of schools that you are going to

see making a shift is in the way schools in Pennsylvania integrate the

assessment anchors throughout the curriculum. I think I talked to you

about the 'Adopt an Anchor 'strategy. Since there is no way to teach all of

that content in the content area, if you find ways to integrate that, I think it

can affect every content area. If you do it right, it will benefit every

content area. Everybody becomes a teacher of English and every teacher

can reinforce math concepts.

In this sense, there is no reason why programs should be eliminated for the sake of the PSSA. Instead of dropping a vocational program, students in alternative schools can receive academic content through their vocational courses.

> It is a lot easier to compartmentalize that we are going to teach English in English class and math in math. The issue is whether we're doing what's best for kids or what's best for adult convenience as opposed to math in science or English in horticulture because it's hard. It takes a lot of time and staff development. It means that everyone is on the same page and is working as a team to pull that together.

Although this type of integration would likely require a fair amount of professional development, if teachers were willing to be flexible and to change their way of thinking it could benefit students.

Addressing Problems and Issues Stemming from NCLB

A plethora of themes emerged when the respondents were asked to ponder the appropriate responses to address any problems or issues with No Child Left Behind. While the respondents believed that the "test only" mentality should be eliminated, they also felt that a rich curriculum, differentiation, and more realistic proficiency mandates should be included. Additionally, the participants asserted that data-driven decision making, teacher preparation and recruitment are critical pieces of the puzzle. Finally, they stressed the importance of communicating with legislators and seeking out models of successful schools and districts.

Enrich the Curriculum, Enhance the Program

The respondents suggested that finding innovative ways to address the needs of their at-risk students was of primary importance. This most often translated into their individual attempts to weave at least some of the aspects of alternative education into the "new" curriculum. As a mathematics teacher noted:

> Let's not be so afraid of not fitting into or aligning with the standards.
> Sometimes I think we think well, our job is in jeopardy if we don't do what
> they tell us to do. What we have to do is be innovative and remember that
> we have to be advocates for these kids.

A rich curriculum that is not merely academic in nature is a key response to No Child Left Behind as it pertains to alternative schools and their students. Because alternative and traditional schools in urban areas are often under the most pressure to raise test scores, these schools often become those where electives, enrichment courses, and other programs have been eliminated. A counselor shared this concern when he asserted:

> When kids are losing art, music, or vocational shops, I have a problem
> with that. So, you may be building test scores but I don't know if you are
> making a less attractive curriculum or a more powerful curriculum
> because of what you might not be teaching because you are so afraid of
> the test scores. There has to be a balance. I really think it all gets down to
> the quality of the leadership in the schools to pull it off. It all depends on
> your mental model of how you can get this stuff done. If you are thinking
> that you have to keep everything limited and that the only important thing
> is the test I think that is going to hurt.

Although the respondents believed that No Child Left Behind has helped bring an end to the mentality that merely labeled and made excuses for alternative students' lack of success, they agreed that a "balance" is what these students needed to be successful. According to the respondents, curriculum "in addition to" rather than "in place of" other programs in their school was in the best interest of their students.

At-Risk Students Require Differentiation

A number of the respondents also focused on the importance of differentiation with regard to instruction and standards as a means of reaching proficiency on the PSSA. They stressed that differentiated instruction is critical because all students, especially those at-risk, do not learn in the same way. Because students are different and bring different "ingredients" to the table, there cannot be one "recipe" that will be successful with all in order to reach AYP. This was reinforced by a math teacher's passionate reflection that alternative school students should not be held to the same criteria as traditional students. He lamented:

> Because many of our students are often grade levels below where they should be, we cannot expect them to test at grade level or reach proficiency. The PSSA does not show the progress made by our students. Once again, it labels them as failures, except now it's called below basic. How can they pass a test that tests them on math that they've never been exposed to? It doesn't make sense.

A social studies teacher echoed this sentiment adding:

> You can't expect students who have never been out of their neighborhood and never been given proper exposure to be able to compete with students whose parents have taken them around the world. Some of these students have never

even received instruction in higher level math courses and now all of a sudden

you want them to achieve proficiency on a state wide math test.

 New School educators asserted that individualization is critical because NCLB

does not appear to make allowances for alternative schools and special education

students. Many respondents contended that NCLB is too general and does not

individualize its mandates to meet student needs. A special education teacher asserted:

> I create IEPs for each of my special education students but in this building each
>
> team of teachers creates an Individual Progress Portfolio for each of the regular ed
>
> kids. Both the IEP and the IPP address and outline the unique set of strengths and
>
> weaknesses for each student and help us as educators help our kids. Every IEP
>
> and IPP is different and we take that into consideration in regard to assessments.
>
> The academic growth Sam makes is different from Suzie's academic growth but
>
> both kids need to be acknowledged and praised, otherwise you're doing them a
>
> disservice. We're here to encourage our kids and celebrate their successes, not
>
> discourage them. I don't see where No Child Left Behind does that. If someone
>
> tells me I'm below basic and I tried really hard, that hurts.

With the type of allowances that are made for special education students in mind, several

respondents proposed a response to No Child Left Behind that resembles or is modeled

after a special education framework. Their argument was that alternative school students

should have to meet a different set of standards just as special education students have an

IEP that fits their individual academic profile.

More Realistic Proficiency Mandates are Necessary

Most respondents felt that No Child Left Behind needs to be more realistic in its expectations for alternative education students. They asserted that instead of demanding that all students reach proficiency by 2014, NCLB should incorporate a value added approach that focuses on growth. As one teacher asserted "You know, if you take someone on a second grade reading level in eleventh grade to a fifth grade reading level, oh God, let's give you a bonus." The respondents contended that the alternative education student would benefit from the elimination of the "test-only", "proficiency by any means necessary" approach to education. They suggested a more realistic, value-added approach that rewards students for academic growth and improvement even if they do not reach some arbitrary proficiency level. One teacher suggested:

> Maybe by using more of a diagnostic approach we could more adequately track students' progress. By charting where students start the year and then showing where they end up, real progress could be noted and acknowledged. So you didn't reach proficiency but we as educators see the strides the student made and we need to make sure that the student is aware that they are achieving as well. It all matters.

Some asserted that narrowing or shortening the PSSA to make it less overwhelming would help alleviate student anxiety. Others believed that eliminating the "one size fits all" testing mentality and incorporating other means of assessment such as portfolios would benefit students. Another teacher added:

> When you think about our Individual Progress Portfolios that we have for the kids, it just reminds me of how it really paints such a total picture of each student.

You know, academically where they are in various subjects, but not only in terms

of paper and pencil types of assessments. There's creative writing, power point

slides that they created, and other things that the PSSA really can't measure. The

portfolio showcases the students and what they're about, big picture, as opposed

to a little snippet that probably isn't all that accurate anyway.

Other respondents also felt that it was unrealistic to use a specific grading system

for the state-wide assessment that is different from the grading system that is used within

classrooms and on report cards. A social studies teacher strongly believed that if No

Child Left Behind's proficiency mandates remain in place, the present grading/reporting

system must cease to exist. In its place and beginning in elementary school at the

kindergarten level, should be assessment rubrics that reflect the PSSA rubrics. Although

such a revamping of the educational grading system would initially be difficult to grasp,

it might better prepare students to reach proficiency. As one teacher added:

Students are too involved with a "D" is okay, it's passing. A "D" is not

proficiency. That's the only way you are going to get kids to get past this ABCD

or a C is average. If you really want them to be proficient, I think we have to look

at how we grade. Not that they are not accountable and you can put a number to

it but you have to start in elementary you can't start it now with our eleventh

graders. So below basic isn't good enough.

She added that once rubrics were incorporated, students must then be taught higher order

thinking skills in order to be successful on the PSSA.

Longitudinal Data Should Drive Instruction

Several respondents noted the centrality of using data to drive instructional decisions. Since many alternative education students are overwhelmed by the PSSA, a longitudinal approach that focuses on academic growth could increase their willingness to do their best on the test. As one respondent suggested:

You could follow a group of students through. When our students come to us in alternative education we could look at where they came from and where we took them to. I think they should get credit for that and we should get credit for that, some kind of AYP credit for what we are able to do with them as opposed to what we did this year as compared to last year with different kids especially in alternative ed where you have so many different issues going on with the kids.

Additionally, the respondents reported that they could use this longitudinal data to help motivate their students and increase student responsibility and accountability. Several participants contended that data should be analyzed and investigated as a vehicle that drives school improvement. In their view, No Child Left Behind gave educators a reason to talk about data in an effort to drive instruction and ultimately meet their students' needs. One teacher noted:

I do think the idea of data driven instruction makes complete sense. I just want to know I'm using valid data. Data just from these high stakes tests does not give me an adequate picture of what my students can do. We need data that reflects our students' true ability.

Several respondents recalled their experiences analyzing PSSA, Terra Nova, and district assessment test data for each student in their building in an effort to create the state-

mandated School Improvement Plan. The students' scores on these assessments helped New School teachers determine which aspects of curriculum they needed to focus on in their classrooms and highlighted which aspects of the curriculum their students already knew. Because the data illuminated student needs, it enabled the teachers to praise their students' strengths and target their weaknesses during their lesson planning.

Teachers Make a Difference

The respondents focused on three areas related directly to teachers: expectations, preparation, and minority recruitment. There was consistent agreement among the respondents that teacher expectations of what students can do is critical in addressing appropriate responses to NCLB. An administrator with over thirty years in education seconded this perception.

> First and foremost there are things we can control in school that deal with our own expectations of what a kid can learn. I can control what I provide to kids. I can control my methodology and differentiate my instruction. I can control the fact that I expect all kids to do this work. I can control the environment of my school, not by myself, but I am saying that is something we can control.

The participants asserted another way to foster change is through teacher preparation. This was reflected by a social studies teacher's contention that No Child Left Behind should begin with teacher preparation in the education departments of colleges. She recalled her experiences as a cooperating teacher and contended that student teachers are not adequately prepared for the realities of alternative education and the issues that accompany it. Another teacher asserted:

> Student teachers coming straight from their college bubble have no idea what reality is for our students. They are not prepared for all the stuff kids deal with daily. They come in really eager with meticulous plans and great activities but then can be completely turned off by the reality awaiting them. We need to teach more than correct lesson plan format in curriculum in college.

Several of her colleagues agreed that many novice teachers are naïve about the realities that many alternative school students face. They are usually unaware that many at-risk students may be well below grade level academically, be parenting, come from a dysfunctional family or live in a group home environment. Additionally, these teachers may not always know about or encourage their students to utilize services such as learning support, subsidized daycare, counseling and other community agencies that are available to them. Because of these factors, teachers may also either hold their alternative school students to an unreasonably high standard or make excuses why they cannot achieve and succeed. Either mindset is detrimental to students. When teachers set reasonably high, realistic expectations for their students and provide them with the resources and support they need to reach specific goals, the goals become attainable.

Other participants reported an increase in the number professional development hours districts require teachers to spend learning about various topics. As a teacher related:

> I have no problem with more in-services or more professional development but it needs to be worthwhile. Give us relevant topics that address how we can help our students. Lets use our resource wisely so we can get the most out of the time

we're spending. If we can focus on what our students in our building need we'll

all be better off.

In addition to learning about curricular methods such as differentiated instruction, the

respondents noted that their district should also focus on other issues that impact student

learning.

A final suggestion focused on minority recruitment. One social studies teacher

made reference to a conversation she had with one of her alternative education students

about the best teacher he ever had. This African-American student described in great

detail the attributes of one of his middle school teachers who was also an African-

American male. During the course of their conversation it became evident that although

this teacher possessed many of the same attributes as this student's other teachers, he felt

especially connected to him because they were of the same race.

I got the impression that he felt he understood the community better or

understood him better. That is legitimate. Are we recruiting minority

teachers? We should be. You think about black colleges and think about

Cheyney University that is not far from us and Lincoln is not that far. So

why not go there and say to the people in the education department, hey

look, we aren't that far away and talk it up and make it a desirable thing.

Even have people from the black colleges go into the predominately black

high schools and say to the students, this is what you can do and this is the

kind of money you can make. The problem is that the kids aren't seeing

anybody who can be an example for them, or who can tell them straight.

> Tell them I went through this and I made it. I think more should be done
> to implement a program like that.

Although New School's student body is primarily African American, during the 2005-2006 school year, there was only one African American New School teacher. This anomaly was seen by the respondents, who were primarily Caucasian, as problematic.

Legislators Lack Expertise and Information

Several respondents felt that alternative school educators must become better advocates on behalf of their students. As one teacher noted:

> Years ago, our district would provide funding for several teachers to attend state alternative education conferences. These conferences gave us a chance to make connections with other teachers in alternative ed programs. It allowed us to feel connected and find effective ways to gain a voice. We felt empowered and encouraged to make our voices heard on a state level. This has fallen to the wayside. Now, if it's not somehow connected to PSSAs and No Child Left Behind it isn't seen as a necessary conference. We need once again to begin making our case for our students.

These respondents felt that teachers should band together, stand up for alternative school students and tell the legislators that at-risk students are not getting a "fair shake." Several others contended that it is the responsibility of the local administration within the school district to take these concerns forward to the legislator groups, both at the state and national levels.

Most respondents viewed K-12 educators as having little influence or contact with legislators. A science teacher with over thirty years experience noted that legislators do not value educators' expertise.

Teachers are kind of, you know, we are just soldiers now. This is what you are doing. That's it. They don't really care for our input or what we think. What the legislators think is better.

The educators overwhelmingly believe, however, that someone should stand up and say that NCLB is not working, at least for this particular student population. Although they felt that building and central administrators and school boards should speak up for alternative schools regarding No Child Left Behind, they did not feel that alternative schools really matter to legislators. They are, in fact, second-class citizens in the world of education and politics.

When top schools start to not reach their goals then the legislators will start looking. Right now it's just schools like us. Nobody really cares. Alternative schools haven't ever been a priority. So then now if you look at it we are still going to be left behind.

As it stands, although they are not necessarily the best candidate for the task, the respondents believe that the politicians at both the state and national levels will be the arbiters of any changes to the NCLB legislation. A science teacher with previous experience in the corporate sector stated:

I personally don't think that the people who study the most, the scholars, the PhDs, the people who write books about it and study it intensely and know the problems the best make decisions. The politicians do. But I really think that the

people who know most about education, about how kids work, about alternative

ed, about how boys work, about how girls work, are overlooked. I think these

businessmen who typically are politicians and lawyers or whatever they are,

whatever their backgrounds are, think they know what's best. And I think they

are very crafty about how they make the public believe they know best but I don't

believe they do know best.

The majority of New School educators appear convinced that bridging the gap and

making a connection between the schools and the politicians may be the only way to

change No Child Left Behind in ways that will benefit alternative education students.

Seek Models of Successful Districts and Schools

A final suggestion the respondents offered involved finding and emulating already

successful, proven models. Locating successful alternative schools and examining and

learning from what they have done was viewed as an important factor in the quest to

reinvent alternative education in the era of NCLB. As an administrator suggested:

The more interaction and connections we can make with other alternative

education programs, the better. If someone out there has found a way of

achieving success in regards to AYP and No Child Left Behind, we need to learn

from them. We model for our students, we need to model for each other.

Several participants referred to a book, Trust in Schools (Bryk & Schneider, 2002), that

contains six different models of districts and schools that had problems and were able to

fix them. According to the book, the key involves cultivating trust at all levels-trust

between parents and teachers and trust between teachers and administrators.

CHAPTER SIX

DISCUSSION

Introduction

The No Child Left Behind legislation impacts all students and schools in the United States. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of alternative school teachers and administrators about the impact of the provisions of No Child Left Behind on at-risk students and alternative education programs. This study tapped into the expertise and perspectives of alternative education practitioners in one school in Pennsylvania in an attempt to shed light on the impact of No Child Left Behind. As is sometimes the case with qualitative research, sweeping and unanticipated changes occurred after the study began that brought about massive changes to both New School and Traditional High School.

The research questions posed in this study explored the No Child Left Behind legislation on one alternative education program and at-risk students it served from the perspective of the teachers and administrators.. Specifically, the questions included:

1. From your perspective what has been the impact of No Child Left Behind on alternative schools?

2. What areas do you feel have been most directly impacted or affected?

3. From your perspective what responses might be most appropriate to address any problems or issues arising from the impact of No Child Left Behind?

Summary of Results

The case study was conducted at an alternative high school in Pennsylvania, in a suburban community approximately twenty miles outside Philadelphia. The alternative school enrolled approximately 200 students in grades nine through twelve. Most of the data for this study was collected in 2005-2006, the first year of the school district's reform effort. This year was seminal in the life of the alternative school in that the First Things First reform irrevocably altered the mission and character of the alternative school. The researcher utilized in-depth interviews, observation, and document analysis as data sources. In-depth interviews with ten alternative school teachers and administrators produced the most significant data while observation and document analysis supplemented the data collection process.

When New School's mission became solely academic in 2005-2006, the alternative education mission of the school that had for decades defined the school simply vanished. The school's autonomy disappeared, vocational courses were eliminated, and as noted by the faculty, the social-emotional needs of it students were no longer a consideration. Enrollment at New School was no longer voluntary but rather was based on the need for credit recovery. The district's partnership with the Institute for Research and Reform in Education and the First Things First reform also altered Traditional, the district's comprehensive high school, as well as New School, the alternative high school. Data showed that the bureaucratic constraints from the district and the requirements of the First Things First reform were completely incompatible with New School's traditional alternative education mission. Consequently, the school's mission and its student population were substantively altered.

Several important themes emerged from this study of the perceptions of the impact of NCLB on an alternative school. Although it should be noted that all of the themes are interrelated, each also stands on its own as a viable finding from this study.

Placing At-Risk Students At-Risk

Placing at-risk students at-risk was most frequently identified by teachers and administrators as a major impact of NCLB and the district's First Things First reform effort. The respondents perceived the alternative school's shift from a vocational and "whole" student approach to one with a singular academic credit recovery focus as having the greatest impact on their school. Once the school's focus became credit recovery, the unique alternative education programs, approaches, and components that had characterized New School were irretrievably lost. The elimination of vocational courses, the technical school, the cooperative education program, the service learning component, field trips, and group and individual counseling effectively spelled the demise of alternative education at New School. The faculty perceived the aforementioned components as the features of their school that enabled students to thrive. They overwhelmingly saw those aspects of their program as the "carrots" that motivated their at-risk student population.

From the perspective of the respondents, the First Things First reform so drastically altered New School that it, in effect, placed their at-risk students at -risk. There was near unanimity among the respondents that the reform caused New School to view students from a narrow, academic perspective rather than a holistic one. As the long history of New School revealed, focusing on the "whole" student was what New School was designed to do. The respondents viewed the school's new and narrow focus

exclusively on academic, credit recovery as a "turn off" to their students that placed them

even more at-risk for school failure. This view is aligned with Ravitch's (2010) findings.

She contends that No Child Left Behind's overemphasis on test scores and academics

may ultimately lead to the exclusion of any subjects, such as the arts, that are not

included on the test (Ravitch, 2010). The respondents perceived this as problematic

because while what the school now offers its students has changed, the at-risk student and

his/her needs have not. The respondents reported that while some students were in an

alternative setting as a result of academic problems, other students needed this space to

address other related issues. While New School was originally designed to work through

issues such as truancy and a lack of confidence and self-esteem through attendance

incentives, service learning, and counseling, these student concerns were abruptly

dropped in light of the First Things First reform.

Changes in Curricular Focus

This forced change in focus and mission noted above also inevitably altered New

School's curriculum. The data showed that the respondents reported a curricular shift

from a very basic curriculum to one that included higher-order thinking skills. The

teachers and administrators noted a heavier emphasis on reading and mathematics

curricula and more time devoted to PSSA preparation since the implementation of the

First Things First reform.   Although most respondents agreed that reading and

mathematics skills are integral and important components of education, they argued that

focusing solely on standards, anchors, and teaching to the test was detrimental to their at-

risk student population. Because their regular as well as special education students were

often multiple years below grade level, the teachers and administrators contended that it

was futile to teach these students subject matter for which they had no background or frame of reference. The respondents believed that the implementation of the new curriculum, coupled with the change to block scheduling, contributed to their students' frustration and lack of engagement.

Differentiation is Key

Because of staff's deep-seated beliefs that at-risk students do not learn in the same ways as their regular education counterparts, most of the respondents viewed differentiation as a key part of effective instructional delivery for their population. The teachers and administrators consistently reported the importance of differentiation with regard to instruction, curriculum, and even reaching proficiency on the PSSA. The majority of respondents did not believe that alternative school students should be held to the same criteria as traditional students. As far as curriculum for at-risk students was concerned, they believed that it was more appropriate to use content that was challenging rather than overwhelming. Overwhelmingly, the respondents suggested that the "one size fits all" testing mentality should be eliminated, academic content should be incorporated through the use of real world applications, and other means of assessment such as portfolios should be employed.

Conclusions

It is important to note that throughout their in depth-interviews, the respondents repeatedly named NCLB as the cause of the numerous changes at New School that they perceived as detrimental to the program. In actuality, of course, NCLB was merely the catalyst for the drastic changes at New School, but did not directly cause the changes that

led to the demise of the alternative program. Rather, New School was at the mercy of an entire set of circumstances and a cascade of effects that were beyond its control.

A Chain of Cascading Effects

When Traditional High School failed to meet its Adequate Yearly Progress goals for three consecutive years prior to the 2005-2006 school year, the district was faced with enormous pressure to revamp the high school in an effort to significantly increase its PSSA scores. An article from *PSEA Voice* (2005) "Academic Atrophy Looms as Testing, Test Prep Take Center Stage" aptly describes the sanctions NCLB enforces on schools such as Traditional High School which fail to produce increased scores on standardized tests such as the PSSA as "a detriment to our schools and students." In response to these sanctions, the district entered into a partnership with the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) and the First Things First reform framework was implemented. The stated goals of First Things First were to improve engagement, alignment, and rigor in classrooms as well as to promote instructional improvement, develop small learning communities, and implement a family advocacy program to help Traditional meet the requirements of NCLB. However, in addition to restructuring Traditional High School, the First Things First reform also had a major impact on New School.

As was the case since its inception, New School found itself required to once again reinvent itself to meet the district's needs. As a result of the First Things First reform, New School became what was identified as a small learning community designed specifically to allow students to recover credits toward graduation. This drastic change in

the school's mission altered everything-- New School's course offerings, its structure,

and its student population. While these radical changes to New School's alternative

program were the result of the chain of cascading effects (Hannan, Polos, & Carroll,

2002) that merely began with NCLB, nonetheless, the data analysis clearly showed that

respondents' perceived NCLB as the culprit. Thus, even although it was in fact the

district's decision to implement the First Things First Reform, the respondents clearly

viewed NCLB as the reason why the district felt pressured to revamp Traditional in the

first place; and set into motion a series of actions and changes that resulted in the demise

of the alternative school. There was a chain of cascading effects, beginning with the

NCLB requirements and sanctions and followed by Traditional's failure to reach AYP

that resulted in the adoption of the First Things First reform and the ultimate dissolution

of New School's alternative education mission and program. As the National Education

Association (2006), echoing the views of the Pennsylvania State Education Association

noted

> Originally, NCLB was supposed to ensure high standards for all children and send
>
> the message that no one should give up on students who don't do well in school.
>
> That message mostly got sidetracked by the focus on sanctions. (p.11)

 Although NCLB was not the direct cause of the demise of New School's alternative

education program, it nonetheless put into motion a series of events that ultimately

culminated in that result. In organizational theory, this is known as cascading change.

Cascading change is a theory of change that basically asserts that a significant initial

change may induce a series of other changes that can reverberate throughout the

organization (Hannan, Polos, & Carroll, 2003b). These other changes would simply have

not occurred had it not been for the initial or triggering change. In this particular case, the NCLB accountability requirements as assessed in terms of AYP was the triggering mechanism that precipitated the cascade of events and actions that eventually led to the dismantling of New School's alternative education mission and program. While occurrences of cascading change are not necessarily uncommon, they are almost always unanticipated and mostly unpredictable. "Organizational changes often generate cascades of related changes in the sense that a single initial change often begets a series of subsequent changes as well" (Hannan, Polos, & Carroll, 2003a, p.467)

A Mixed Bag of Results for Alternative Schools in the Era of NCLB

The era of No Child Left Behind is characterized by standards and accountability. These critical components of the legislation are accompanied by mandates regarding the performance of all students including those at-risk for school failure. Ultimately, these mandates can be seen as holding pros and cons, positives and negatives for alternative schools and the at-risk students they have traditionally served. While the introduction of standards and accountability have the potential to contribute to the education of the at-risk student, they also can be problematic for this unique student population.

The Upside of Higher Standards

Equity is defined as the state, quality, or ideal of being just, impartial, and fair (Merriam-Webster, 2007). A powerful argument for NCLB is that equity for all students has never been achieved in the United States. As a result of No Child Left Behind, higher academic standards are required for all students, including alternative education students and other groups of students who have been traditionally under-served. Most of the respondents were hopeful that No Child Left Behind signaled an end

to the era that labeled the at-risk student, found excuses for their lack of success, and shunted them aside.

      Richardson and Hines (2002) assert that in order to make equity in education the birthright of all students, the pattern of providing the least to those students who need the most must end. The respondents in this study overwhelmingly believed that this particular student population can learn and achieve and are most decidedly deserving of a good education. According to Guerin and Denti (1999), however, at-risk students have traditionally been excluded from a mainstream education that featured an academic focus. Thus, a clear positive associated with the imposition of academic standards that apply to all students is that these policies attempt to level the playing field for the at-risk student population and to afford these students an opportunity to receive the same content, especially in areas such as reading and mathematics, as their traditional education counterparts. Clearly, these students need and require the additional resources that support the attainment of more rigorous standards. Nonetheless, exposure to such content can allow the at-risk student the opportunity to engage in the higher order thinking skills that will help them develop the critical thinking skills needed to compete in a global economy.

      Richardson and Hines (2002) assert that equity in education is attained when there is a state of balance, especially in regard to students at-risk.

      Furthermore, as the 21st century becomes more mature, there must be an understanding that equality of educational opportunities does not mean that every student should have the same program of education. Nor as the courts have emphasized, does it mean that all students must have the same amount of money

expended on them. Instead, it means that every person should have the kind of

quality education that will best meet his or her needs as an individual and a

member of society. As a result, a provision for balance is what at-risk students

need. (p. 12).

Although alternative schools are supposed to be designed to meet the unique

needs of its at-risk student population, Sagor (1999) contends that this is not always the

case. The social-emotional aspects of the at-risk student's education have typically been

prioritized while academics are not. Sagor argues that at-risk students should attend

schools where they are afforded the opportunity to achieve academic success as well as

social-emotional growth. By raising the bar for all, and addressing educational equity for

the at-risk student, this student population would no longer get a "second-class"

education that could place them forever in the mass of the under-educated and condemn

them to limited life opportunities. In addition, the increased focus on academics could

encourage the at-risk student to raise their sights toward additional educational

preparation at a two or four year college. Educational equity with a provision for balance

will make alternative schools a viable alternative in the era of standards and No Child

Left Behind.

The Downside of Higher Standards

According to Kraemer & Ruzzi (2001), a disadvantage concerning the standards

movement is that rigorous academic standards do not often appeal to the at-risk students'

interests and needs. This would seem to be bourn out in this study. The respondents at

New School asserted that their students' frustration level increased when they were

required to receive curriculum for which they had no background knowledge or frame of

reference. New School's special education teacher specifically recalled her reluctance to teach her special education students Algebra and Geometry when they still struggled with mastering basic mathematical concepts. New School teachers also reported their school's curricular shift was accompanied by an increase in student disciplinary issues. From their perspective, many of the students felt overwhelmed by the new expectations and exhibited passive and not-so passive behavioral problems that detracted from teaching and learning.

Glines (2000) contended that a curriculum that appeals to the at-risk student must be personalized, individualized, integrated and interdependent. New School's new curriculum represented a standardization of the state academic standards and held little appeal for the at-risk student. As Glines (2000) noted, world-class standards and accountability assessments will not motivate at-risk students unless they also focus on the affective domain and provide a more holistic approach to education. The need for this kind of balance seems imperative. At-risk students are most motivated to learn if they are afforded personal, individualized attention, a choice of learning alternatives and individual diagnosis or prescription for the skills they need to address. New School's credit recovery mission did not meet these conditions and this proved problematic for New School's student population as well as its program.

The Upside of Increased Accountability

The press for greater accountability was the catalyst for prioritizing engagement, alignment and rigor as well as increasing the availability of professional development and other resources to support instruction at New School. New School teachers reported more emphasis in their classrooms on Engagement, Alignment and Rigor (EAR)

regarding their instruction and there was a marked increase in the number of classroom walk-throughs their principal conducted using First Things First's (2001) EAR classroom visit protocol. In addition, other new resources flowed into New School as the result of the heightened accountability demands. These included additional content area teachers, new mathematics textbooks, a new literacy curriculum (complete with a classroom library), Smart Boards, and classroom sets of laptops.

The sheer quantity of required professional development for the teachers increased and most teachers saw this as an opportunity to enhance their effectiveness in the classroom. This aligns with Kraemer and Ruzzi (2001) who contend that alternative education teachers must be fully prepared and given the appropriate professional development needed to meet the needs of their students.

The Downside to Increased Accountability

The negative impact that the increased emphasis on high stakes testing had on New School and its student body was consistent with the findings of Berliner and Nichols (2007), Popham (2009) and Ravitch (2010). Additionally, the worst nightmares of high stakes testing and accountability environments were also illustrated in this case. The most devastating outcome of the increased accountability for New School was, of course the loss of its alternative school identity, its long-standing mission, and its traditional student population. New School's mission shifted from a holistic, balanced approach to an entirely academic, credit recovery focus - and with this shift, the school's alternative identity vanished. Even worse, New School ultimately and unfortunately became little more than a "dumping ground" for Traditional High School's failing students who were unlikely to reach proficiency levels on the PSSA. Because the district was so desperate to

ensure that Traditional reach AYP, the potentially low-performing students were required to transfer to New School even as late as several weeks prior to the administration of the PSSA. Such "misuse of testing" is where Ravitch (2010) asserts the problem lies. She contends that a wider lens, rather than the narrow one high stakes testing provides, should be used to promote students, assess teachers and grade schools However, tests were never designed to gauge such things (Ravitch, 2010).

Apart from this particularly flagrant misuse of accountability under NCLB, the proficiency mandates themselves were problematic for the at-risk students. At-risk students are often deficient by one or more grade levels in reading and math to begin with, the very subject areas the PSSA assesses. Thus, these students have even higher hurdles to clear than regular education students. At risk students' deficiencies could result from poor attendance, chronic truancy, special education status, or transitory tendencies. As a result, these students may need more time to strengthen their academic skills and achieve proficiency (Kohn, 2001; Tumasz, 2001).

Recommendations

This case study serves as a useful addition to the literature on alternative schools and the legacy of NCLB. While the extant literature has focused on alternative school education, few studies have addressed the impact of No Child Left Behind on alternative schools and the at-risk student population. This study begins to fill that void. Therefore, a series of recommendations can be made for other alternative schools and for legislators and policymakers who are interested in examining the impact of No Child Left Behind on the at-risk student and alternative schools.

The findings reported from this study point to the fact that No Child Left Behind may have an especially deleterious impact on at-risk students and alternative programs. While this study examined only one case, it produced some interesting and provocative results. The purpose of this study was to examine the perceptions of alternative school teachers and administrators about the impact of the provisions of No Child Left Behind on their schools. The results of this study could be used as a guide for additional qualitative research in order to address other problems or issues arising from the impact of No Child Left Behind in other alternative and non-alternative schools.

Recommendations for Alternative Schools

Several recommendations can be made for alternative schools on how to maintain their viability in the era of No Child Left Behind. While much of the findings relate to the specific context of this study, the struggles the participants reported regarding No Child Left Behind are likely to be relevant to other teachers and other administrators in other alternative education programs. The experiences and difficulties these practitioners experienced may be relevant to districts that have alternative programs. These recommendations include: (1) the need to achieve balance, (2) the need for autonomy, and (3) the necessity of an integrated curriculum.

Balancing Academic and Social-Emotional Needs of At-Risk Students

Balancing the at-risk student's academic and social-emotional needs in response to No Child Left Behind could allow the alternative school to meet the needs of the "whole" student. Kraemer and Ruzzi (2001) assert that alternative education students

need academic resources that address the conceptual understandings found in more rigorous standards yet still appeal to the at-risk students' interests and needs. The authors also contend that the challenge for alternative schools is to respond to the demands of higher standards in ways that are not antithetical to the schools' mission and structure (Kraemer and Ruzzi, 2001). Although Pennsylvania requires at-risk students to reach proficiency on the PSSA, attempts to raise standards and strengthen curriculum cannot simply be standardized across all schools. This case study revealed that No Child Left Behind shifted the mission and focus of alternative education to something other than what is meaningful for at-risk students. While many students are in alternative programs as a result of academic problems, other students use alternative education to address social-emotional needs, self-esteem issues, and even truancy problems. While academics are an important and necessary component of the at-risk student's education, this focus must be balanced with the social-emotional aspects of education in order to address the needs of the "whole" student.

Lange and Sletten (2002) assert that alternative schools can only be effective when they address the academic as well as the social-emotional needs of their clientele. If alternative schools are to remain a viable "alternative" for at-risk students in this era of standards and accountability, then they will need to better attend to a new "balance" between the academic and social-emotional needs of their students. They will need to find new and creative means of addressing academic proficiencies within the context of educating the whole child. This is likely to be a challenging task but one that necessarily needs to be faced.

Autonomy is Key

Merriam-Webster (2007) defines autonomy as the condition or quality of independence, self-government or self-determination of a community or group. This study would suggest that the autonomy that is key for alternative schools is twofold. First, the alternative school must have a degree of autonomy if it is to foster a sense of community, shared vision, and ownership among all its participants, including teachers, administrators, students and parents. Second, students must be afforded the discretion to choose to attend the alternative school or not. A number of studies found that at-risk students can in fact be successful in an alternative school setting if the school is granted sufficient autonomy to be effective. (Lange and Sletten, 2002; Leone and Drakeford, 1999; Butchart, 1986; Johnson, 2001; Harper, 2007). Leone and Drakeford (1999) view a lack of autonomy as detrimental to alternative students and schools. They assert that a strong level of autonomy, professional decision-making and a sense of community in addition to academic learning are key elements in an effective alternative school. Butchart (1986) concurs that successful alternative schools are notably autonomous. He contends that in a successful alternative school

> staff feel empowered to create cohesive programs with clear, well-defined goals and to have ownership of the programs. Ownership and empowerment add to commitment and responsiveness to students, many of whom, are hungry for responsiveness and attention, and who respond in kind. The result is frequent student reports of caring teachers and a learning environment which is demanding but supportive (p.15).

Butchart also cautions that alternative programs should be small, autonomous institutions that students affiliate with by choice rather than coercion. Choice can foster cohesiveness and a positive school climate. Autonomous alternative schools also can facilitate the creation of structures that allow and encourage student participation in the critical work of the institution as well as for altered roles for staff. The diversification of roles for alternative school faculty and even students may add to their sense of commitment, affiliation, ownership and involvement in the alternative school. In addressing the differences between traditional schooling versus autonomous alternative schooling Buchart (1986) asserts

> the estrangement, marginalization, and disenchantment that at-risk students
>
> exhibit toward conventional schooling is reduced in proportion to the degree to
>
> which the alternative school creates the possibilities for participation and
>
> affiliation. The difference in climate or ethos between traditional schools and
>
> alternative schools is the difference between formally constituted groups, whose
>
> bonds are regulations, and communities, whose bonds are shared commitments,
>
> affection and mutuality (p.17).

Johnson (2001) echoes Butchart's notion of autonomy and suggests that choice and shared vision are critical components of the effective alternative school. It is important for students and teachers to want to be a part of an alternative school where a "consumer-driven process" and "needs-based diversity" replace arbitrary rules and an inflexible curriculum. Further, in alternative settings with a greater measure of local autonomy, one is more likely to find stakeholders cooperating in the creation of a shared vision. As a result of this autonomy, students may try harder and feel a real ownership in the school

(Johnson, 2001). Harper's (2007) findings parallel Johnson's. Harper contends autonomy can positively impact the at-risk student's motivation. She asserts autonomy is an essential component of effective alternative programs for maximizing internalized change and contributing to at-risk students' success. In this sense, effective alternative programs must retain a strong level of autonomy or risk being ineffective or irrelevant.

An Integrated Curricular Approach is Now Critical

Alternative programs must integrate, and infuse a real-world, hands-on, needs-based curriculum with academic curriculum if the alternative school is to remain a viable option for the at-risk student in the era of NCLB. Further, alternative programs that do not embrace an integrated curricular approach may contribute to the reasons why the at-risk student lacks motivation, drops out of school, and is ultimately "left behind." While there appears to be a strong tendency to make the alternative school curriculum more "traditional" and academic in nature, this concept is flawed and detrimental to the at-risk student who thrives on relevant, needs-based curriculum that is often "hands-on." This approach is at best superficial in addressing the needs of at-risk students.

The impact No Child Left Behind has on curriculum was voiced by the study's respondents and reinforced and supported by other alternative education research studies (see, for example Conley, 2002; Lange and Sletten, 2002; Leone and Drakeford, 1999). The educational equity intent that accompanies No Child Left Behind requires alternative school students to receive curriculum similar to that of their peers in more traditional educational settings. However, that more academically-oriented curriculum needs to be integrated into the existing alternative school curriculum. Such integration would allow

the unique needs of the at-risk learner to be met in a way that does not eliminate the

central components of an alternative school program such as vocational courses, service

learning, or counseling that can motivate and help this type of student thrive. Although

such an integrated curricular approach is likely to be daunting, it is a necessary response

to the era of standards and accountability as it relates to the at-risk student and the

viability of the alternative program.

Recommendations for Legislators

There are also recommendations gleaned from this study that are relevant for

legislators and other policymakers on the state and national levels who set specific

policies for broad-ranging initiatives like No Child Left Behind. Those in authority to set

policy must be cognizant of the needs and characteristics of the at-risk student so that

they can make informed decisions.

At-Risk Students: Who They Are Should Determine What They Need

Greater familiarity with and knowledge of at-risk students their characteristics,

strengths, and weaknesses, would better prepare policymakers to set realistic and

attainable expectations for them. The literature on at-risk students and alternative schools

has well documented the importance of addressing the specific needs of these students so

that they can achieve educational success (Abe, 2008; Bishop, 1989; Bower, 2008;

Conley, 2002; Donmoyer & Kos, 1993; DuCloux, 2009; Dunbar, 2001; Fantini, 1976;

Kronick, 1997; Manning & Baruth, 1995; Presseisen, 1988; Rossi, 1994; Sanders, 2000;

Williamson, 2008; Young, 1990). Typically these students are economically

disadvantaged and from minority groups. They may have poor literacy and academic

skills, inadequate social, emotional and behavioral skills, limited or unavailable family support, low self-esteem, and/or lack of positive adult role models. Additionally, this often transitory student population may have significant learning or emotional disabilities. Those who would seek to influence policymakers' decisions regarding at-risk students and alternative education programs should be prepared to educate and inform these individuals. For example, information sessions or open forums focusing on the impact of NCLB on at-risk students and alternative educational programs could be developed and offered to legislators.

Alternative Performance Measures for At-Risk Students

Policymakers and legislators should avail themselves of alternative performance measures such as the Pennsylvania Performance Index and Value-Added Assessment for assessing at-risk student performance rather than relying solely on PSSA scores and AYP. The Pennsylvania Performance Index encourages, recognizes, and rewards improvement on the PSSA, even if students do not reach proficiency. As a growth model measure, it could have an especially positive impact on at-risk students and alternative schools.

The Pennsylvania Value-Added system is a longitudinal approach that focuses on academic growth. Student progress is not merely equated with attainment of a specified proficiency level on the PSSA, but rather is based on longitudinal data that track student progress over a number of years. Thus, student attainment is adduced in relation to that student's own past performance and growth rather than some arbitrary and external imposed standard.

The current No Child Left Behind accountability system does not recognize the progress of all students. Since No Child Left Behind requires that Adequate Yearly Progress is defined by the State in a manner that results in continuous and substantial progress for all students, it is critical that PSSA progress measures are sensitive to the academic achievement of all students, not just students who reach Proficiency. If a student scores Below Basic one year and Basic the next, this academic growth should be rewarded and recognized. Since at-risk students learn at different rates and make achievement gains at different times, it follows that the progress made by alternative schools and at-risk students may be somewhat erratic and non-linear. Additionally, because Adequate Yearly Progress decisions are made about a school from one year to the next and the student body in each grade that is tested differs from one year to the next, the Adequate Yearly Progress calculation should reflect and value the achievements of individual students.

Recommendations for Future Research

At least two recommendations for further research also need to be noted. First, an important and worthy topic for future research would be the examination of the perceptions of at-risk students themselves regarding the impact of No Child Left Behind on their education. While this study focused on the perspectives of alternative school teachers and administrators regarding the impact of No Child Left Behind, it would enlighten and deepen our understanding of the phenomena to hear the voices of the at-risk students themselves. Attaining a student perspective on what is working with No Child Left Behind and what is not could serve as a valuable resource and problem solving tool regarding the schooling options offered this often underrepresented type of student.

A second recommendation for future research would focus research interests on examining the issue of the continued feasibility and viability of alternative schools in a NCLB accountability era. It would be interesting and valuable to assess whether or not the alternative schools' original mission of providing a "holistic" education is now passé and a mere relic of the past or whether alternative schools can find ways and means to remain a viable and necessary alternative in today's educational environment.

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Appendix A

Participant Letter

November 2005

Hello All,
As many of you already know, I am pursuing my Ph.D. in Educational Leadership in the
Education Policy Studies Department at The Pennsylvania State University. I defended
my dissertation proposal in June and am finally ready to begin the research for my study.
It focuses on two things you are very familiar with…alternative education and No Child
Left Behind. While participation in my study is completely voluntary and I realize how
valuable and scarce your time is, I would love to interview each of you to find out your
thoughts on these issues. I will place a consent form in your mailbox. If you would like
to participate, please sign and date the consent form, place it in my mailbox or return it to
me in person. Please do not let the consent form scare you! Approximately a half an
hour (or less) of your time is all I will actually need. Just to give you a heads up, my
interview questions are listed below. From your perspective:
1. What has been the impact of NCLB on alternative schools?
2. What areas of the school do you feel have been most directly impacted or
   affected?
3. From your perspective, what responses might be most appropriate to address
   the problems or issues arising from the impact of NCLB?

Since I would like to begin my interviews this month, once I find out who would like to
participate, I will begin scheduling the interviews. To make this process as convenient
for you as possible I can schedule interviews before school, after student dismissal,
during block 4 when I am free, etc. Just let me know your preference via email or in
person. I am excited about hearing what you have to say about how No Child Left
Behind impacts alternative education. Thanks in advance for being such an integral part
of this process.

Carla

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. What has been the impact of No Child Left Behind on alternative schools?

2. What areas of the school do you feel have been most directly impacted or affected?

3. From your perspective, what responses might be most appropriate to address the problems or issues arising from the impact of No Child Left Behind?

Appendix C

New School's School Improvement Plan
2005-2006

SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLAN FRAMEWORK
FOR
NEW SCHOOL – 2005-2006

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

New School has always been the place for at-risk students, who have not been successful in the traditional high school or middle school environment, to get a fresh start. These students have a history of poor attendance, grades and academic skills. In addition there are many family, attendance, discipline, drug, and alcohol issues that are detrimental to their academic performance
The 2005-2006 school year will be one of change at New School – new mission, new curriculum, and new name. This School Improvement Plan is a summation of the challenges and the plans to meet those challenges and achieve performance targets.

IMPROVEMENT TARGETS

This plan is designed to accomplish the following goals:

- At least 54% of all students will be proficient in reading as measured by state-wide assessments.
- At least 45% of all students will be proficient in mathematics as measured by state-wide assessments
- At least 95% participation by eligible students in required state-wide assessments.
- 4-year graduation rate of 80% by the year 2014.
- Implementation of partnership with First Things First to improve student achievement.

SHARED VALUES

The professional staff of New School continues to believe that all students can learn and succeed when given the opportunity. We strongly believe that we must provide a challenging, nurturing, character-building, and safe environment that is conducive to learning. The staff also believes that teamwork with the families of students is a critical element of academic success.

MISSION

The mission of New School is to help students achieve success in a core academic curriculum. Both the curriculum and schedules have been tailored to allow students to recover their areas of deficiency as well as stay on track for an on-time graduation.

VISION

The program at New School has changed but the vision remains the same – "A Step in the Right Direction". The goal is to provide students with the necessary information, knowledge, skills, materials, and support to increase academic performance and assist them in becoming responsible and productive citizens.

DATA

The PSSA results for 2005 were disappointing. Over the last three years, scores for New School students were improving. Although most of the students were still scoring in the Basic and Below Basic ranges, progress was being made with students moving up the scale of their performance categories. The eighth grade students showed progress in both reading and math. Unfortunately, 86% of the eleventh graders scored Below Basic in both reading and math.

The participation rate for the PSSA test was 86.4%. This was disappointing because we had improved from 57% to 86% the previous year. The measures that we used in the past to improve participation failed this year.

Six students had Individualized Education Plans (IEP). These scores were significantly worse than the 2004 results. 86% of the students scored in the Below Basic Range compared to 69% in 2004 (18 out of 21 students).

The graduation rate for New School is considered met for 2005 because of growth not because of attainment of the 80% goal.

DESIGN/DELIVERY

Our school district has partnered with First Things First to bring about comprehensive reform for both the traditional high school and New School. There has been an entire school year spent planning the 2005-2006 school year. The highlights of the First Thing First Framework are small learning communities, a family advocate system and instructional improvement. The instructional goals of the First Things First Framework are explained by the acronym EAR – Engagement, Alignment and Rigor. First Things First uses research-based strategies and supports instructional improvement with staff development by educational professionals.

The academic program and schedule for students at New School have been changed to favor an intense core curriculum aligned to the PSSA Standards and Assessment Anchors. The math curriculum is integrated Algebra and Geometry. The language arts curriculum is the First Things First Literacy Curriculum. An additional benefit of this core curriculum is credit recovery for students to graduate on time.

ARTFUL USE OF INFRASTRUCTURE

The teachers and staff at New School have always worked as a small learning community; even before the relationship with First Things First. The principal and the staff take responsibility for the success of the individual student as well as the total program.

Many of the students at New School are dealing with personal issues that interfere with educational achievement. There are many programs at New School that are designed to support the social and emotional needs of the student. We recognize that these problems can greatly hinder academic progress.

We are very optimistic for the implementation of the First Things First Advocacy Program. This program provides a structure to build a personal relationship with students and their families. We are looking for the Family Advocacy Program to help us solve the problem of attendance.

DEVELOPMENT OF PEOPLE

Staff development is an important part of the First Things First Framework. There have been numerous training sessions in the 2004-2005 school year to prepare teachers to implement the First Things First Framework. In addition, there will be ongoing support

during the 2005-2006 school year. This support will center on teaching strategies overall and in the First Things First literacy curriculum in particular. In addition, there will be support for the Family Advocacy Program. All staff development will have increased student achievement as its goal.

MILESTONES OF PROGRESS

The school district and First Things First have developed tools for teachers to use to judge the progress of students. Teachers have a web-based data system to view each student's standardized test scores for all grades. These tools can pinpoint deficiencies in specific standards and assessment anchors. In addition, there are District-wide Quarterly Snapshots in math and language arts.

The First Things First Literacy Curriculum has assessments given at certain intervals to determine the success of instruction.

An improvement in attendance will be a major milestone of success of the Family Advocacy Program.

CONCLUSION

The 2005-2006 school year will be a challenging one for New School. There is a new partner to help us achieve student success. There is a new core academic curriculum, a new schedule and a new program for building family relationships. The plans are in place, the teachers are enthusiastic, and the students who need our help have been identified. Failure is not an option.

NEW SCHOOL

A FRAMEWORK FOR SCHOOL IMPROVEMENT PLANNING

2005-2007

STUDENT ACHIEVEMENT

IMPROVEMENT TARGETS

1. READING
At least 54% of all students will be **proficient** in reading, as measured by the annual state-wide PSSA assessments.

2. MATHEMATICS
At least 45% of all students will be **proficient** in mathematics, as measured by the annual state-wide PSSA assessments.

3. STUDENT PARTICIPATION IN STATE ASSESSMENTS
At least 95% of eligible students will **participate** in required state-wide assessments.

4. FOUR-YEAR GRADUATION RATE
The 4-year **graduation rate** for high school students will increase consistently (to at least 80% by 2014.

INTRODUCTION

The 2005-2006 school year is one of change at New School. New School is the seventh small learning community of the Traditional High School. The academy is designed as an "opportunity center" for students who failed ninth grade math and language arts and students in eleventh and twelfth grade that are credit deficient. Both the small learning community and opportunity center concepts are the result of the district's partnership with First Things First.

The vocational component is gone in favor of an increased core academic program. Also gone is the eighth grade. The eighth graders are now serviced in the CARE Program for elementary and middle school students.

The other programs at New School remain in place – the Expectant and Teen Parent Program with on-site daycare, the CARE Program for elementary and middle school students and the TR Extended Day Program.

SHARED VALUES

The professional staff of New School continues to believe that all students can learn and succeed when given the opportunity. We strongly believe that we must provide a challenging, nurturing, character-building, and safe environment that is conducive to learning. The staff also believes that teamwork with the families of students is a critical element of academic success. The Family Advocacy component of the First Things First Program will serve as a catalyst for improved family involvement and improved student achievement.

In partnership with First Things First, the staff has developed an academic core curriculum aligned with the PSSA Standards and Assessment Anchors and has created a collaborative small learning community that benefits both the students and the teachers.

The small learning community is the vehicle for teachers to plan and evaluate instruction – both their own and that of their peers. In addition, teachers are able to pinpoint their staff development needs to improve instruction. Everything that happens in the small learning community focuses on improved student achievement.

MISSION

The mission of New School is to help students achieve success in a core academic curriculum. Both the curriculum and schedules have been tailored to allow students to recover their areas of deficiency as well as stay on track for an on-time graduation. Differentiated Instruction techniques are an integral part of the mission.

Courses at New School are taught in an integrated and cross-curricular style to reinforce skills necessary to address performance-based standards and assessments.

The professional staff works in partnership with families to address any family, social, or health issues that may affect student achievement.

VISION

The Program at New School has changed but the vision remains the same – "A Step in the Right Direction". The goal is to provide students with the necessary information, knowledge, skills, materials, and support to increase academic performance and assist them in becoming responsible and productive citizens. This vision is based on the premise that, when given the opportunity, all students can learn and succeed. Teachers acknowledge their pivotal role in helping students succeed.

Students at New School will return to the traditional high school in the appropriate grade and on track for graduation.

DATA
MATH AND READING

The first step in analyzing New School's PSSA scores is to understand the inherent uniqueness of New School's student population. Students come to New School because they have not been successful in the traditional educational setting. Many students have a history of poor attendance, grades and academic skills. In addition many of the students have attended several different school districts which have negatively affected consistency of instruction and test results. Some of the students have been at New School for a year or more, while some students enroll a month before the PSSA tests.

The PSSA results for 2005 were disappointing. Over the last three years, scores for New School students were improving. Although most of the students were still scoring in the Basic and Below Basic ranges, progress was being made with students moving up the scale of their performance categories.   The eighth grade students showed progress in both reading and math. Unfortunately, 86% of the eleventh graders scored Below Basic in both reading and math.

Six eighth grade students took the PSSA tests. The results for the reading scores were that 33% were in the Proficient Range; 33% in the Basic Range; and 33% in the Below Basic Range. The results for the math scores were 33% in the Basic Range and 66% in the Below Basic Range. All six of the eighth graders were black and five of the six students were economically disadvantaged. Only one student had an Individualized Education Plan (IEP).

These scores were a significant improvement over the 2004 results of 58% Below Basic and 8% proficient in reading. The math results also showed improvement with 67% in the Below Basic Range compared to 75% in 2004 and 33% in the Basic Range compared to 8% in 2004. Although improvement was made, the results were still unacceptable.

The data analysis revealed that 50% of the eighth grade students need help with the fundamentals of understanding nonfiction text. In addition 67% of the students need help with the fundamentals of interpretation and analysis of fiction and nonfiction text. The data also showed that students needed help in the fundamentals in every math category

> 67% in Numbers and Operations
> 67% in Measurement
> 83% in Geometry
> 100 in Algebraic Concepts
> 83% in Data Analysis and Probability

Twenty-two eleventh grade students, or twelfth grade students who had not taken the test in eleventh grade, took the 11th grade PSSA Reading tests. The results were that 5% were in the Advanced Range (1 student); 9% were in the Basic Range; and 86% were in the Below Basic Range. The gender breakdown was twelve males and ten females. Four of the students were white; sixteen were black; one was Hispanic; and one was multiracial. Twelve (55%) of the students were economically disadvantaged. Six students had Individualized Education Plans (IEP). These scores were significantly worse than the 2004 results. 86% of the students scored in the Below Basic Range compared to 61% in 2004 (19 out of 22 students).

The data analysis revealed that the students needed help in the fundamentals in the following areas:

> 91% in Comprehension and Reading Skills
> 91% in Interpretation and Analysis of Fiction and Nonfiction Texts

Twenty-one students took the 11th grade PSSA math tests. The results were that 5% were in the Advanced Range (1 student); 5% were in the Proficient Range (1 student); 5% in the Basic Range (1 student); and 86% were in the Below Basic Range. The gender breakdown was eleven males and ten females. Four of the students were white; fifteen were black; one was Hispanic; and one was multiracial. Eleven (52%) of the students

were economically disadvantaged. Six students had Individualized Education Plans (IEP). These scores were significantly worse than the 2004 results. 86% of the students scored in the Below Basic Range compared to 69% in 2004 (18 out of 21 students).

The data analysis revealed that the students needed help in the following areas:

> 90% in Numbers and Operations
> 90% in Measurement
> 86% in Geometry
> 86% in Algebraic Concepts
> 86% in Data Analysis and Probability

The teachers at New School do not rely on PSSA results alone to plan instruction. They have become more proficient in the use of the Alternet Performance Tracker and are using it to pinpoint instructional needs – particularly in math. Performance Tracker is a web-based tool that keeps track of all PSSA tests, Terra Nova tests and the School District Quarterly Snapshots. (http://www.norristown.altperf.com).   A particularly effective benefit of Performance Tracker is that teachers can pinpoint specific standards, assessment anchors and even specific PSSA questions to help guide instruction. We have embraced First Things First Philosophy of Engagement, Alignment and Rigor (EAR).

Both the math and literacy teachers use school district and their own curriculum - embedded assessments to guide instruction. The school district has quarterly snapshots in math and reading. These are scheduled by the school district and New School students take the same ones as other students in the same grade level.

In math, the teachers have conferences with students after each weekly quiz. These quizzes are aligned with the PSSA Assessment Anchors. These teachers keep records for each assessment anchor to plot instructional needs, progress and mastery per student. In addition, the math teachers record anecdotal comments for each student daily. These anecdotal records are important forms of informal assessment to help guide instruction. The math teachers also have instituted a dual portfolio system – one for work in progress and one for completed work.

In the language arts area, there are specific records that are kept with the First Things First Literacy Program – Fluency/Comprehension Assessments, Practice Reading Logs and Conferences, and Academic Conferences with each student every six weeks. Each one of these activities has guiding instruction for each individual student as its purpose.

DATA
PARTICIPATION IN PSSA TESTS

It is necessary to understand the at-risk student to understand our participation rate. These students have not had academic success since elementary school, if even then. At New School, we work very hard to help students realize their capacity for academic achievement. A big part of the teachers' job is to try and get students to reengage in their learning. We employ differentiated instruction techniques and performance-based assessments for all students instead of relying on traditional tests. Unfortunately when confronted with the PSSA test, some students give up, or just fill in the circles without any thought, to get the test done. Other students try, but get so frustrated with the test that they just give up. Some students have walked out of class and sometimes have even walked out of school in frustration.

The participation rate for the PSSA test was 86.4%. This was disappointing because we had improved from 57% to 86% the previous year. The measures that we used in the past to improve participation failed this year. Those measures included:

- Letters home stressing importance of the tests.
- Personal phone calls to parents of students urging participation.
- Phone calls on the day of the test if the student is not in school.
- Incentive activities such as basketball tournaments and pizza parties.
- Snacks supplied before the start of testing.
- Scheduling Terra Nova tests for grades not taking PSSA so that everyone in building is testing and the PSSA students don't feel overburdened.
- When a student gives up during the test (this happens quite often), the student goes to a neutral site with another teacher or the principal for individual encouragement.
- We held off disciplinary actions such as suspensions etc. until after the testing window.

It is possible that the eleventh grade students had been with us for several years of testing and we didn't make any changes to spark enthusiasm for the test.

Even with all of this effort we had seven students not show up to take the test; one student was incarcerated right before the test; and one student was hospitalized for depression right before the test. These nine students can skew the test results when the total taking the test is only twenty-two. Lastly, four of the students included in New School's results were students in the TR Extended Day Program. These are students who have been expelled from the traditional high school or New School. Their scores are reported for New School even though they are in a separate program.

DATA
SPECIAL EDUCATION

At New School, we have one Special Education teacher who serves as a Resource Room teacher. At times, there are students whose Individualized Education Plans (IEP) dictate a self-contained classroom. The one teacher handles both situations.

PSSA Standards and Assessment Anchors are now included on each student's IEP. These have been included in the last year. The goals for the students are written clearly stating a specific grade percentage goal for each standard and anchor. The special education teacher monitors student progress daily for self-contained students and weekly for inclusion students. The Special Education teacher confers with each student biweekly based on grade and social skills data supplied by regular education teachers.

When a student is struggling, the Special Education teacher provides additional support on assignments etc. or works with the regular education teachers to differentiate materials or strategies that will help the student. When necessary, a student's IEP may be changed, but usually changing materials or strategies are all that is needed.

The Special Education teacher maintains contact with parents on a regular basis – usually biweekly. The special education students also receive mid and marking period grades according to the normal school district time schedule.

The Special Education teacher is responsible for the creation and deliverance of the IEP. A regular education teacher is always included at the IEP conference. Unfortunately, we have a problem in getting parents to attend the IEP conference. The Special Education teacher makes   phone calls, and sends registered letters to assure attendance. Despite these efforts, many times parents do not attend IEP conferences. Sometimes, IEP conferences are done over the phone.

All six of our Special Education students scored in the Below Basic Range for their grade level. Most of these students have reading levels in the third, fifth, or seventh grade reading levels according to the Brigance Inventory of Basic Skills. These reading levels make it very difficult for these students to perform on an eleventh grade level test. These students have made progress and, some have increased their reading levels one to two years by working with the Special Education teacher, but there are still significant gaps.

DATA
GRADUATION RATE

The graduation rate for New School is considered met for 2005 because of growth not because of attainment of the 80%goal. An actual figure for graduation was not available because it is not final until mid October. We are pleased that we made growth because

the reality is that, as an Alternative School, many of our students arrive one or two years behind schedule for graduation.

Our improvement in this area has resulted from the use of Bloomsburg packets and Independent Learning System Packets as well as the PLATO Computer Learning System. We have received a $10,000 grant from the Genuardi Family Foundation to increase our number of licenses for Plato. By using Plato, students can work on a computer program to receive credit for a full academic year's work in every academic subject. The Plato academic content is aligned with the PSSA Standards.

The students, who can afford them, are able to complete Bloomsburg packets. The student has six weeks to complete these packets and receive credit for a year of academic work. All staff members make themselves available for tutoring so that students can complete these packets in the six - week time limit. If the student is motivated, he/she can make up a complete year of credits in addition to their regular year course work.

The reality of our students' personal situation is that many can not afford the Bloomsburg packets at $109 per packet. Teachers have developed their own version of the Bloomsburg packets called Independent Learning Systems (ILS) and make them available for students free of charge to receive credit. The content in these ILS packets are aligned to the PSSA Standards and Assessment Anchors. Another benefit to the students is that the teachers can give additional time for completion while Bloomsburg packets are limited to six weeks.

DESIGN

The school district chose the Institute for Research and Reform in Education (IRRE) and the First Things First Framework as their partner for comprehensive school reform at the traditional high school and New School. We have worked all during the 2004-2005 school year to plan for implementation in the 2005-2006 school year.

> First Things First, a framework for school reform, has one goal: to help students at all academic levels gain the skills to succeed in post-secondary education and good jobs. In the process, FTF helps districts and schools meet the requirements of No Child Left Behind.

> **FTF districts and schools commit to:**

> > Strengthening relationships among students and adults.
> > Improving engagement, alignment and rigor of teaching and learning in every classroom, every day.
> > Allocating all resources – budget, staff, time and space – to achieve the first two goals.

Our partners achieve these changes using three strategies:

> Small Learning Communities.
> The Family Advocate System.
> Instructional Improvement.

> Developed by the Institute for Research and Reform in Education, the FTF framework is grounded in research about how young people develop and how schools promote students' engagement and learning. FTF continuously incorporates changes suggested by new findings, the experience of FTF sites and other reform efforts.

The above description is taken from the First Things First website (http://www.irre.org/ftf/)

New School is the **"opportunity center"** learning community for students who failed ninth grade math and language arts. In addition, students in the eleventh and twelfth grades, who are credit deficient in other academic areas, also come to New School in order to work on needed skills to improve scores on the PSSA tests. At the end of one year, students should return to the traditional high school on grade level and back on track for on-time graduation.

The schedule has been totally changed for New School. The vocational program has been discontinued. Students now have intensive instruction in math and language arts in a block scheduling format. This intensive instruction is aligned to the Pennsylvania Assessment Anchors in math and language arts. You can view a sample of this alignment in the appendix of this report.

At New School, we have fully embraced the First Things First instructional goals of:

- Active Engagement
  - Teaching Strategies that engage **ALL** students in their own learning
  - Learning materials of high quality and high interest to students of diverse achievement levels and backgrounds

- Alignment
  - State standards and curriculum
  - High stakes assessments

- Rigor
  - Expectations of proficiency or better for **ALL** students
  - Examine learning materials and student work expected
  - Individual accountability of all students to demonstrate mastery
  - Re-teaching toward proficiency for all

In their research, First Things First has identified key instructional resources that are needed to accomplish the goals of Engagement, Alignment and Rigor (EAR). They are:

- Time
    - Additional instructional time for Math and Literacy accomplished by the block scheduling format
    - Lower class ratios so students receive more individual time with the teacher
    - Teachers have common planning time with their small learning community
    - Professional Development time
        - Early Dismissal Days
        - Staff Development full days
        - Summer Staff Development
        - Peer Staff Development Protocols

- People
    - Small Learning Community Coordinators to facilitate Staff Development
    - First Things First Staff Development
        - Instructional Strategies
        - Use of Data to improve instruction
        - Site visits for observation and training

- Information to measure what matters
    - Technology based data for teachers – Performance Tracker
    - Content and instructional "refreshers" supplied by First Things First.

DELIVERY
MATH

The mathematics department at New School has implemented a math program this year titled "Integrated Math." This subject combines the fundamentals of both Geometry and Algebra I into a course that gives students a broad and solid understanding of each content area, meeting all Pennsylvania State Standards in the process. Furthermore, because the subjects of Geometry and Algebra I are covered in the course, the students will receive a full year's math credit for each subject, thereby receiving two credits for the year's content, as opposed to the usual one credit that is awarded. This process is indicative of the overall purpose of New School, as the school's primary objective is to serve as a facilitator for credit recovery for students who previously failed mathematics and English. By recovering these credits at New School, students are therefore more likely to graduate on time from the traditional high school.

The driving force behind the Integrated Math program at New School is the school district's Core Curriculum for 11th grade mathematics. Specifically, the Integrated Math course follows the district's Core Curriculum Standards for "Anchors Algebra" and "Anchors Geometry". A new text book has been purchased – <u>Integrated Mathematics</u> from McDougal Littell. One reason that this book was chosen was because there is a heavy emphasis on higher level thinking skills instead of basic Algebra and Geometry. Each of these curricula is designed for the primary purpose of ensuring that students are proficient in the Assessment Anchors for the Pennsylvania Mathematical Standards for those subjects, as measured by the PSSA tests administered to students in 11th Grade. To provide further support and scaffolding to students to ensure this objective is met, the math department here at New School, and throughout the district, will be taking part in a weekly initiative named "Anchors Friday", in which students will be given support for those Assessment Anchor areas in which they have not performed as well. To measure students' progress in these areas, the district will administer "Snapshot" tests throughout the year, the results of which will be used by the mathematics department at New School to guide further instruction.

Group assignments are another tool that the mathematics department at New School plans to utilize as a means to students becoming proficient in all Assessment Anchors. *First Things First*, the organization whose philosophies now guide the overall approach of the district, emphasizes the importance of group work, and offers a number of creative and interesting strategies to make group assignments effective for all students. It is also an organization that relies heavily upon the practice of Differentiated Instruction, which we as a math department plan to fully utilize in our efforts to effectively reach students of all learning styles. Research has shown that instructional activities incorporating visual, auditory, kinesthetic, and other sensory skills and abilities have a positive effect on student achievement. By providing this instruction, we as a department, fully expect our students to achieve to the proficiency-level in all mathematics assessment anchors when they take the PSSA test for this content area.

Other means of support for students in the subject of mathematics include an after-school tutoring program that runs Monday through Thursday throughout the school year. Additional tutoring can be arranged during the school day, as well. Finally, because of the smaller class sizes at New School, students are able to receive greater individual attention during class-time than in a larger classroom setting. This allows teachers to provide additional scaffolding and additional opportunities for informal assessment of students, to see where further academic support and instruction may be necessary.

DELIVERY
LANGUAGE ARTS

Block scheduling allows students at New School to receive language arts instruction each day for eighty-four minutes. The First Things First Literacy curriculum was adopted by New School this year in an effort to strengthen students' reading and writing

skills. First Things First Literacy strengthens adolescent literacy by marrying powerful teaching strategies with curriculum that is engaging and accessible for all students. The curriculum targets students entering high school reading two to four years below grade level by providing curriculum that respects teenage sensibilities, focuses on their strengths, and emphasizes success. First Things First Literacy supports students as they build reading ability and a sense of efficacy. The curriculum serves as a vehicle to enable students to gain the confidence, experiences, and skills critical for reading success.

During each block period of instruction, First Things First Literacy provides a balanced approach that features opportunities for students to read, write and hear reading. While the text is not leveled for each learner, the text load throughout the unit is controlled and gradually expanded as the unit progresses so that students can succeed as they practice their developing skills. Teachers use a variety of instructional strategies to engage students with text. Teachers activate, tap, and build background knowledge, develop vocabulary and help students make multiple connections with the text. Student practice is a key component of the curriculum. Instruction is student-centered and teachers provide multiple entry points into the text as well as multiple touches with text by the students. Students are taught to focus on making sense of what they read. The teachers make visible the critical invisible comprehension strategies that effective readers employ. Another key component of the curriculum is teacher modeling and identification of comprehension strategies during instruction as well as when students are using those strategies as they interact with text. The goal is for students to internalize comprehension strategy use and be able to apply those strategies whenever they read. The comprehension strategies which are employed are: activating prior knowledge, questioning, predicting and visualizing, monitoring and repairing comprehension, summarizing, inferring and interpreting, and synthesizing.

The First Things First Literacy curriculum is unit-based and draws on a wide variety of rich, inviting, challenging text that respects the life experiences and interests of adolescent, urban youth. The FTF Literacy Curriculum contains units on Nelson Mandela, New Orleans, Mount Everest, Latin Studies, Jamaica, and Natural Disasters. The text in the units is primarily expository, which is difficult for struggling readers, but it is also most of the text these students will be asked to navigate during their high school experience. Units vary in size from four weeks to six weeks in length. When struggling readers change topics daily and there is no consistency in the lessons they engage in, they are faced with new text too often and remain beginning readers. Because First Things First Literacy allows students to stay inside a unit for multiple weeks, they are able to build vocabulary and schema. This allows students to experience success with challenging text and practice newly learned strategies. Students use learning strategies such as graphic organizers, Make and Break Sequencing, and Integrated Writing. With the support of these teaching strategies as well as Read-Alouds, Think-Alouds, Cloze, and Data Sets, modeling by the teacher, and many opportunities to practice and apply newly learned comprehension strategies; students experience success and gain the skills and attitudes to become readers.

Practice Reading is a major component of First Things First Literacy Instruction. Teachers provide students with significant instructional time each class period to practice authentic reading with rich classroom libraries. Practice Reading time is an active teaching time as teachers match books to readers, conference with students about their reading and monitor and observe reading behavior. Students and teachers keep track of how much they read each day on reading log bookmarks, share information in reading circles and write creatively about characters, setting, plot and theme.

Additionally, First Things First Literacy assesses student needs using assessments of fluency and comprehension. They set growth targets for each student and monitor each student's growth and challenges using a structure called Academic Conferences. In addition to pre and post measures, First Things First Literacy teachers focus on 1/3 of the class each six weeks and monitor fluency and comprehension while learning the reading story or history of those students. Special emphasis is placed on this group of students in an effort to identify their strengths and weaknesses. During Academic Conferences, teachers share student progress and reflect on their own practice. They then set goals for the next six-week period for both themselves and their students. These Academic Conferences provide a structure that ensures continuous monitoring of student progress as well as collective responsibility for improving teaching and learning.

Because improving struggling readers reading and writing skills is so critical, First Things First Literacy teachers receive training and support as they learn to work with the curriculum. Teachers learn a multidimensional approach to working with struggling readers that can be used in all content areas. In May and August 2005, the language arts, math and social studies faculty were trained on using the First Things First curriculum. This support continues with on –going training, site visits every three weeks as well as individual coaching throughout the school year.

Literacy teachers have also aligned the First Things First curriculum to the Pennsylvania Department of Education's Reading and Writing Anchors. This alignment is key to addressing the standards and skills that students are required to master for the PSSA. Teachers also focus on differentiating aspects of the curriculum to address the needs of all students. This differentiated approach allows students the opportunity for growth that is critical in strengthening reading and writing skills.

DELIVERY
SPECIAL EDUCATION

The math teacher has worked with the special education teacher to build a program for the special education students. Over the last three years, there has been a definite progression to improve student skills:

- Year One – students work in Resource Room for one-on-one attention

- Year Two – Students in regular math class and also use the Compass Math

Software for skill reinforcement.

- Year Three – Students in regular math class with accommodations such as more

  time for assignments and differentiated techniques for curriculum

  delivery.

The special education teacher has a very good relationship with all of the academic teachers. She confers both formally and informally on a regular basis. Teachers supply their lesson plans for advice on needed modifications per student. Even if modifications are not needed, the knowledge of the lessons has helped the special education teacher keep the special education students connected to the entire school population. In addition, the resource room serves as a quiet refuge when special education students are frustrated and/or overwhelmed in their regular academic classes.

We are having a difficult time reconciling the goals on the student Individual Education Plans and the skills needed to achieve proficiency on the PSSA tests. Our main concern is the student and providing what they need to progress. At the same time, we worry that by providing accommodations, we are not preparing students for the high-stakes test.

DELIVERY
OTHER CURRICULUM AREAS

Both the science and social studies curricular areas are committed to reinforcing proficiency in the PSSA Assessment Anchors by incorporating math, reading and writing skills in their classes.
We have hired a third English teacher to teach reading and writing skills in the social studies content area. The social studies teacher is incorporating these same reading and writing skills in the social studies curriculum. Both the third English teacher and the social studies teacher are being trained in the First Things First Literacy skills with the language arts teachers. In addition, we are emphasizing study skills, differentiated instruction, and multiple intelligence strategies.

The science team is incorporating math into the science curriculum by focusing on data tracking and mapping via graphs and charts. We are supporting reading skills by using the First Things First note taking skills when we read science journals and textbooks. Both science courses are reading a novel during one or both semesters. In biology, we are reading Outbreak by Robin Cook and in earth systems; we are reading Silent Spring by Rachel Carson. We will reinforce writing skills by keeping scientific journals, notes and lab reports.

DEVELOPMENT OF PEOPLE

All of the academic subject teachers at New School are certified in their content area. Six of our ten academic and the one special education teachers have their Master Degrees; one teacher has a Master's Equivalency and three teachers have a Bachelor's Degree plus at least twenty-four graduate credits. Our special education teacher is certified in special education and is working on the Bridge Certificate for "Highly Qualified" status according to the dictates of No Child Left Behind. Our academic teachers have an average of ten years experience working with at-risk populations. Our teachers have taken workshops and courses on differentiated instruction. Two of our teachers are working on the Penn State differentiated instruction certificate.

The school district has set aside one Early Dismissal Day a month for Professional Development. In addition, time has been set aside in the new block schedule for staff development. The staff has participated in staff development on teaching strategies in the block scheduling format with First Things First consultants. All academic teachers are being trained in the First Things First Literacy Strategies to maintain consistency in instruction across the curricular areas. This training happened during the summer before the start of the school year and will continue every three weeks throughout the school year.

One unique aspect of using First Things First is the peer review. All teachers were trained before the start of the school year on how to participate in peer review of lessons to help teachers reach the goal of every lesson following the instructional goals of Engagement, Alignment and Rigor. These peer reviews will happen when teachers meet in common planning time.

The Staff at New School has always performed as a small learning community. The principal has fostered an environment in which the staff shares successes, problems, and solutions in a collaborative environment. In addition, many of the Staff members are involved in graduate course work. Time is set aside during regular staff meetings for people to share what they are learning with everyone else. The staff also shares educational journals or articles of interest.

The collaborative and small environment has also helped everyone on the staff to develop as an educational leader. We solve problems from the bottom up, not from the top down. Everyone has taken leadership roles according to individual areas of expertise.

In addition to the First Things First Staff Development, all teachers in the district use a portfolio to self-assess their performance. The vehicle for this portfolio is Charlotte Danielson's Enhancing Professional Practice: A Framework for Teaching. Every teacher has a conference with the principal at the beginning of the school year to set goals and to decide areas for review for each individual teacher.

The principal and staff at New School believe in helping our students develop as well as each other. To this end, all teachers provide tutoring before and after school hours. One of our language arts teachers and our special education teacher will provide tutoring one hour per day four days a week in math or reading for students who have not demonstrated proficiency in PSSA tests. This tutoring is paid for through an Educational Assistance Program Grant from the Pennsylvania Department of Education. An example of the handout made available to students is in the Appendix.

CALENDAR
FOR
CONTINUOUS PROFESSIONAL LEARNING
AND
COLLABORATION

DATE/TIME WHEN?	PARTICIPANTS FOR WHOM?	TOPIC/FOCUS/PURPOSE WHAT/WHY?	DELIVERY FORMAT HOW?	FACILITATOR/PROVIDER BY WHOM
8/30/05 Full Day	Traditional high school and New School Staffs	Small Learning Communities Themes/Planning Peer Review	Workshops	First Things First
8/31/05	Traditional high school and New School Staffs	Family Advocacy	Workshops	First Things First
9/01/05	New School Staff	Teaching in Block	Workshops	First Things First
Monthly Early Dismissals	New School Staff	Small Learning Community Issues	Workshops Collaborative Groups	First Things First Small Learning Community Coordinators
Monthly Peer Reviews	New School Staff	Improved Teaching	Small Learning Communities	First Things First Tuning Protocol
Quarterly	New School	Review Data	Small Learning Community	Small Learning Community

DATE/TIME WHEN?	PARTICIPANTS FOR WHOM?	TOPIC/FOCUS/PURPOSE WHAT/WHY?	DELIVERY FORMAT HOW?	FACILITATOR/PROVIDER BY WHOM
Snapshots	Small Learning Communities	Plan Instruction	Communities	Coordinators
Weekly	New School Small Learning Communities	Review Data Plan Instruction Family Advocacy	Small Learning Communities	Small Learning Community Coordinators
Every 6 weeks	language arts teachers	Review Data Plan Instruction	Small Learning Communities	language Arts Teachers
Every 3 Weeks	language arts teachers	First Things First Literacy Observations	Classroom Observations Conferences	First Things First Literacy Trainers
Every 3 weeks	all academic teachers	First Things First Literacy Training	Workshops on Teaching Strategies	First Things First Literacy Trainers
2/17/06	Traditional high school and New School staff	First Things First	Unknown Planned by NASD Administrators And First Things First	First Things First
11/23/05 And 2/08/06	New School Teachers Parents Students	Review Student Progress	Conferences	Teachers Parents Students

ARTFUL USE OF INFRASTRUCTURE

The teachers and staff at New School have always worked as a small learning community; even before the relationship with First Things First. The principal and the staff take responsibility for the success of the individual student as well as the total program. The math and language arts teachers offer tutoring. We solve problems from the bottom up instead of from the top down. The staff develops programs so that the students participate in activities similar to the high school environment – newspaper, yearbook and service learning etc. The staff is very concerned that the students at New School don't feel like "outcasts" because they are removed from the high school environment. In addition, everyone does something "extra" to aid in the effective management of the building – scheduling, staff development, and computer grading troubleshooting to name a few. The overall atmosphere at New School is collaborative. We have adopted the "Fish Philosophy" from the Pike Fish Market in Seattle for both the staff and the students.

Many of the students at New School are dealing with personal issues that interfere with educational achievement. There are many programs at New School that are designed to support the social and emotional needs of the student. We recognize that these problems can greatly hinder academic progress. We have one counselor for the seniors; one counselor for the ninth through eleventh grades and one part-time counselor for our teen mothers. In reality, all of the teachers act as counselors. In the past, we made sure that every student connected with an adult. This was done informally. The new Family Advocacy Program of First Things First is a much more structured program and should be a major enhancement to our program.

We have a very active Student Assistance Team (SAP). The team meets every week and identifies students who are "in crisis". This team refers students for professional counseling or to Montgomery County Children and Youth Agency for specific issues. We have instituted a peer mediation program to help our students deal with conflict resolution.

There are a number of outside groups who help New School students with issues that hinder their school performance. Members of the General Electric Company Retirees (ELFUNS) volunteer to tutor our students in Math. Members of the Urban Family Council meet periodically to discuss peer pressure, abstinence and teen pregnancy issues. The Coca Cola Pathways to Excellence Program meets with students to stress the improvement of attendance, grades and attitude issues. Students receive rewards at the end of the school year for their performance on these issues.

The one area that has caused much frustration in the past at New School has been the lack of involvement of parents in the educational program. Our Parents Club has grown from two parents to ten. We are very optimistic for the implementation of the First

Things First Advocacy Program. This program provides a structure to build a personal relationship with students and their families:

HIGHLIGHTS:

- A way to utilize family involvement to boost student achievement
- Every Family Advocate will have a group of ten students
- Advocates will conduct formal group meetings once a week to work on issues that are affecting students' academic progress
- Advocates will "touch base" informally with their students every week
- The Advocates will develop a relationship with parents/guardians through monthly communication – home visits, phone calls, written communication etc.
- Advocates will monitor student academic progress and help plan interventions with other staff members
- Conduct effective family conferences – 2 per year at times other than normal district conferences
- Advocates serve as the primary contact for families
- Refer students and/or families to additional services when needed

BENEFITS TO STUDENTS:

- Students feel more connected
- Students know that adults in school and at home are on "same page"
- Students feel understood and supported in pursuit of academic success
- Parents learn how to help their student
- **IMPROVED STUDENT GRADES AND BEHAVIOR**

We are looking for the Family Advocacy Program to help us solve the biggest problem at New School– **Attendance Issues.** We can not use all of the First Things First Strategies to improve student performance if the students are not in the building. Over the last few years, the average attendance at New School is 60% attendance. We are hoping that the formal structure of the Family Advocacy Program will help us convince students and their parents of the importance of an education. Ideally, students will now want to come to school because they will start being successful in academics. We are concerned that the students are so comfortable in their failure cycle that they can't, or won't change.

We are also concerned that the number of students with poor attendance is too many for the School Visitor person assigned to our school to handle by himself. For the 2005-2006 school year, our enrollment is one hundred and forty students. With the average attendance at 60%, that means that only eighty-four students are in school on any given day.

We fully realize that there is a financial issue to providing transportation for our students, but the reality is that most of our students walk to our school. On bad weather days, our attendance can drop to 40%. That means that only 56 students are in the building. The staff at New School feel that they can not fulfill their mission as an "opportunity center" if students are not in the building to take advantage of the opportunity.

DOCUMENTATION

Documentation of successful student achievement is garnered from many sources – diagnostic, quarterly snapshots, student portfolios, curriculum-embedded assessments, attendance data, and anecdotal records. The ultimate documentation of student achievement will be the eleventh grade PSSA Assessments in reading and math. For this year, we will get results for our current eleventh graders. After this year, we will send the tenth graders back to the traditional high school for their eleventh grade year. Although the staff at New School will have played a pivotal role in their success, they will not be directly involved with the students when the scores are received.

The staff at New School has researched the effectiveness of different teaching strategies – both those of First Things First and other educational experts. In the Appendix Section of this report, there is a brochure reviewing the literature on Small Learning Communities and also a bibliography of articles reviewed by New School staff.

MILESTONES OF PROGRESS

What Will Be Accomplished?	By When?	By Whom?
Quality Teaching ✓ Use data to plan instruction ✓ Intense core curriculum ✓ Relationships with families improve instruction	**<u>Immediately</u>** Reviewed weekly math and language arts supported by other academic areas Improvement shown on curriculum-embedded assessments **<u>Quarterly</u>** Snapshots	All academic teachers especially math and language arts math and language arts teachers
Quality Leadership ✓ Collaborative ✓ Focused on academic achievement ✓ Solve problems ✓ Attendance	Immediately Maintain throughout year	Entire New School staff

MILESTONES OF PROGRESS

What Will Be Accomplished?	By When?	By Whom?

Artful Use of Infrastructure
 	
✓ Family Advocacy
✓ Improved Attendance -90%
	Immediately and throughout year
	
	Weekly Family Advocacy
	   ❖ 5 Minute Check in
	   ❖ Advocacy Periods
	Family Contact
	
	Work with Home and School Visitor and Administration
		Assigned Family Advocates
		
		Home and School Visitor Attendance Committee

Continuous Learning Ethic ✓ Teaching Strategies for the Block Schedule ✓ Peer Review ✓ Professional Portfolios	Immediately Consistently during Small Learning Community Meetings Consistently throughout year for review in June	All Teachers

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VITA
Carla Glover Queenan
cxg327@psu.edu

Education

Ph.D., Educational Leadership, August 2010
Education Policy Studies Department, Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA

Master of Arts, English, May 1992
Temple University, Philadelphia, PA

Bachelor of Arts, English, May 1989
Howard University, Washington, D.C.

Certifications

- Elementary and Secondary Principal, Pennsylvania, issued 1999
- English, Level II, Pennsylvania, issued 1992

Professional Experience

Teacher, Alternative School, Pennsylvania
August 1990- Present

- Taught English to at-risk students in grades 8 – 12
- Designed English/language arts curriculum; taught Read180 and First Things First Literacy
- Substitute for building principal and lead teacher
- Senior Class Advisor; Yearbook Moderator
- Crisis Team, Attendance Committee, Student Assistance Program , School Improvement Committee, Career Week Committee member
- Building Committee Co-chairperson
- Served as Cooperating teacher for four student teachers
- Facilitated numerous Professional Development workshops and trainings

Teacher, Summer School, Pennsylvania, 1992-98, 2008 and 2009

- Taught American literature to students in grade 9
- Taught British literature to students in grade 12

Graduate Assistant, Educational Policy Studies department, Pennsylvania State University, State College, PA 1999-2000

- Conducted research for an Educational Leadership professor

Part-time Instructor, Montgomery County Community College, Blue Bell, PA, 1990

- Taught Basic Writing Course