At-Risk Students and the Dropout Rate:
What influences student decisions to remain in school or drop-out in a suburban high school?

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# Table of Contents

Abstract 7

Acknowledgements 8

Chapter 1: Introduction 9

  Statement of the Problem and Significance 9
    Purpose of the study 9
    Setting 11
    At-risk students 12
  Practical and Intellectual Goals 13
    Practical goals 13
    Intellectual goals 14

Research Questions 15

Theoretical Framework 16

  Goal theory 17
  Organizational theory 20

Connection between the two theoretical lenses 24

Summary of Research Design 24

Chapter 2: Literature Review 26

  Introduction 26
  Low Incidence Dropout Communities 27
  Why Students Dropout 28
  Impact of Dropping Out on the Individual and Society 32
  Impact of Interventions on the Dropout Rate 33
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Chapter</th>
<th>Title</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>At-Risk Students and Resilience</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Impact of the School Organization and Size on the Dropout Rate</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Qualitative Studies that Examine the Decision Making Processes of At-Risk Students</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Summary</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 3: Research Design</td>
<td></td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Methodology</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Site and Participants</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>53</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Validity and Credibility</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Limitations of the Study</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Protection of Human Subjects</td>
<td>58</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conclusion</td>
<td>59</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Chapter 4: Research Findings</td>
<td></td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Introduction</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Context of the Study</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Defining Risk Factors</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>The Stories of Six At-Risk Students</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Shane</td>
<td>65</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sharon</td>
<td>69</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Allison 73
Alana 77
Patty 81
Sonny 84

Why Students Choose to Dropout 85
Lack of success during their freshman year 86
Organizational factors 87
Curriculum 90
School rules and expectations 91
Attendance 92
Student retention 93
Suspensions 94
Economic factors 95
Home support 97
Peer relationships 100
Drugs and alcohol 102
Lack of school success 103
Mental health issues 104
Unrealistic future expectations 106
Negative relationships with faculty 107
Connections to the school community 107

Why Students Choose to Stay in School 109
Focus on college preparation and graduation 109
Abstract

The drop out phenomenon is a persistent problem in public schools across the United States. The consequence of a student dropping out of school negatively impacts both the individual who chooses to drop out and the society that ultimately is responsible for supporting that individual. The purpose of this study is to analyze the decision making processes of at-risk students who either dropout or choose to persevere and complete their high school education and to understand what factors influence that decision in a semi-wealthy suburban community. A number of factors influence students during their decision making process. Students who receive special education services or live in poverty are significantly less likely to graduate than their peers at Franklin Park High School. This qualitative case study examines why students choose to drop out and remain in school in a low incidence drop out community. The two theoretical frameworks of goals theory and organizational theory work in concert to provide a lens to view the dropout phenomenon from the perspective of the individual and the organization. The vast majority of at-risk students at Franklin Park High School are able to persevere and graduate, but a percentage of students choose to drop out each year contrary to their own self-interest. At-risk students who are able to graduate are focused on the goal of high school graduation, willing to complete all tasks related to reaching that goal, and access appropriate resources and supports to achieve their goal. At-risk students who chose to drop out are not focused on the goal of high school graduation, course failures, negative peer relationships, attendance issues, and a lack of connection to the school community.

Key words: at-risk student, drop out, goal setting, organizational theory
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Chapter I: Introduction

Statement of the Problem and Significance

The dropout issue has plagued public schools in the United States for decades. The consequence of a student dropping out of school negatively impacts both the individual who chooses to drop out and the society that ultimately is responsible for supporting that individual (Rumberger, 2011). Dropping out of school is not an independent action, but it is a process that often occurs over a number of years and involves multiple factors within the school setting and externally in the community and the student’s home (Rumberger, 2011). The decision does not occur in a vacuum and can be affected by forces within the school that can push students out and further engage them in the educational process or by external factors that pull students out and contribute to their decision to leave school early or remain until graduation (Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). This is the point where the student’s goals and perseverance are tested within the organizational context of the school setting (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). Further understanding this process in a setting where there is a low incidence of students dropping out can add insight into why students drop out of school in such settings, what factors influence that decision making process, and what interventions or combination of interventions may positively influence a student who is at-risk of dropping out and ultimately encourage that student to persevere and meet their goal of graduation.

Purpose of the study. The purpose of this study is to analyze the decision making processes of at-risk students who either dropout or choose to persevere and complete their high school education and to understand what factors influence that decision in a semi-wealthy suburban community. The focus of this study is a suburban community in northeastern Massachusetts where there is a low incidence of students dropping out of high school. The
community is predominantly white and middle income. Students in the community often perform at or slightly above state averages in MCAS (Massachusetts Comprehensive Assessment System) standardized state testing, student attendance, and graduation rates. The estimated median family income in this Massachusetts community in 2009 was $88,320 which is higher than the state average median family income of $64,081 (City-Data, 2012). Approximately thirteen percent of the student population receives free or reduced lunch, and it is noteworthy that this number has increased nearly twenty-five percent in the past five years (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Students have role models within the school community that have completed high school, attended college, and are employed. The high school encourages students to complete high school and continue on to post-secondary educational opportunities. Slightly more than 80% of the graduates of Franklin Park High School in 2010 reported attending either a two or four year college upon graduation.

The dropout crisis in this country is an epidemic that has a significant impact on individuals and society. Public high school students make the choice to leave school even if it is contrary to their own self-interest. According to a study completed by the Urban Institute in 2001 only 68% of high school students across the country graduate from high school. Across the nation nearly one fourth of all students fail to earn a diploma within four years of entering high school (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). The decision of an individual student to drop out of school often is the result of a long process of disengagement from the school setting (Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). High school completion percentages vary by how drop outs are defined and several socioeconomic and regional factors (Swanson, 2003). Despite conflicting national percentages of dropout rates, there is a clear national problem. One goal of the Department of Education is to define graduate rates and attrition rates to provide easier comparisons across
states. Each student who leaves high school prior to graduation limits their short and long term economic opportunities (Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Sum, 2007). Dede (2007) for example states, “Failure to address our dropout crisis will lead to dismal economic results in the years ahead. Why are we throwing away so much human potential?” (p. 13). The value of an education cannot be understated, and there are clear economic consequences for the individual and society as a whole for each student who drops out.

**Setting.** This study will examine this phenomenon in a high school that serves a suburban community in northeastern Massachusetts whose school population nearly mirrors the state dropout rate. This research project will explore what contributes to an at-risk student’s decision to either dropout of high school or complete all of the requirements and graduate. This study may provide valuable information about why students decide to stay in school or dropout of a suburban community in northeastern Massachusetts. The results may also inform retention interventions and assist school personnel when counseling a student who is in the process of deciding to leave or remain in school.

During the past five years the dropout rate in this high school located in northeastern Massachusetts has averaged approximately three percent annually. This school is far from a dropout factory and the three percent drop-out rate nearly mirrors state averages according to Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education 2009 statistics. There are many schools across the state and the nation with a similar profile. Schools with this similar profile also have a significant number of students leaving school prior to earning a diploma; but most of the students in these schools are able to earn a diploma within five years (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2009). Examining a school that reflects
the state dropout average may provide some answers into how to mitigate the overall drop-out rate across the state.

**At-risk students.** More than 15% of students at the high school exhibit patterns that place them at-risk for dropping out of high school based on academic, attendance, and behavioral indicators (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). Data from the past five years indicate that drop-out rates for students with special needs or students who are identified as low income is significantly higher (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). This is also true in the community that is the focus of this study. It is also evident that many students who exhibit at-risk behaviors or characteristics persevere. More than 80% of the students who are at-risk of dropping out are able to complete all of the requirements for graduation. Many of these at-risk students benefit from a concerned adult in their life or an intervention program that helped them persevere to graduation. What happens during the decision-making process that moves a student toward graduation and away from making the decision to leave school? This study will explore what contributes to an at-risk student’s decision to either drop out or complete all of the requirements and graduate.

**Practical and Intellectual Goals**

**Practical goals.** The drop out phenomenon fundamentally impacts the individual who drops out and the society that must provide a variety of direct and indirect support systems for these individuals. This study has the practical goal of understanding why at-risk students in low incidence drop out communities make the decision to leave school or remain until graduation. Maxwell writes that practical goals in qualitative studies often focus on the process, “it is more important to understand the process by which things happen in a particular situation than to rigorously compare the situation to others.”
There is a tremendous amount of information available that discusses the economic and social consequences of dropping out of high school. Swanson writes, “it should be noted that earnings, employment prospects, and other labor force experiences of those who terminate their education with a high school diploma lag far behind those who continue their schooling and earn a college degree.” (Swanson, 2009, p. 23) The economic and social consequences of those who fail to earn even a high school diploma can be dire in the current economy. The literature demonstrates that not one factor isolated alone can account for why a student chooses to leave high school. The decision is slowly made over time and is impacted by several school and non-school factors. Understanding this process and the factors that impact a student’s decision can provide insight into potential effective and ineffective interventions.

Dropping out significantly impacts an individual who does not complete his or her high school education and has a broader impact on the state and society (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Sum, 2007). A high school dropout earns approximately $1.4 million dollars less over their lifetime than someone who earns a bachelor’s degree (University of Wisconsin-River Falls, 2007). Individuals who do not receive a high school diploma earn less, are unemployed at higher rates, depend more heavily on government subsidies, and pay less in state and federal taxes to support the general public good (Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Sum, 2007). It is noteworthy that an “overwhelming” proportion of Medicaid and welfare recipients were high school drop outs (Education Commission for the States, 2007). These are compelling economic reasons for individuals and society as a whole to place a greater emphasis on all students graduating from high school. The Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University released a study identifying the cost to the state of Massachusetts for a student who drops out of high school as $5300 per year (Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Sum, 2007). This means that the 9,959 dropouts during the 2008 school year alone in Massachusetts
effectively cost the state $52,782,700 annually (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). In this northeastern Massachusetts suburban community those thirty-three students who represent that three percent of students who made the decision to dropout will cost Massachusetts $174,900 annually. The economic impact alone on the individual and society warrants further study of the drop out phenomenon.

Learning more about what an education means to students who have dropped out, what the context was for students who chose to dropout, and what series of events led to their ultimate decision could clarify some potential solutions for practitioners. In one study researchers were able to break reasons for dropping out of school into two broader categories of push-in and pull-out (Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2008). This method of categorizing themes into school-based and external factors may be helpful in determining what variables can be influenced by school policies and programs and what variables cannot be influenced by schools. Schools need to examine these reasons, take ownership for the variables they can influence, and develop strategies to improve the educational outcomes of at-risk students.

**Intellectual goals.** This qualitative study will attempt to address the intellectual goals of understanding the meaning of the decision making process for at-risk students; understanding the context that the decision occurs within; examining unanticipated phenomenon within the context of Franklin Park High School; and understanding the process, “by which events and actions take place” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 25). Additionally, it is valuable to develop “causal explanations” as to why students made the decisions that led to either leaving school prematurely or graduating (Maxwell, 2005, p. 25). Qualitative studies can provide insight into the process an at-risk student undergoes when deciding to either dropout or remain in school. Understanding this decision making process can help to determine what can be done to prevent an increase in the
current dropout rate in the targeted community, and also perhaps to decrease the dropout rate in other communities. Additionally, much of the previous work has been done in urban communities where there are higher drop-out percentages. Many students drop out of suburban schools where there is a low incidence of student attrition. Looking at a suburban community could build on that previous work and explore the similarities and differences that may or may not exist.

**Research Questions**

The focus of this study is the decision of at-risk students to either complete the requirements for graduation or dropout of school. One goal of this study is to understand how students went through the decision making process and what factors influenced their decisions to either dropout or remain in school. A second goal of this proposal is to examine why students who were at-risk of dropping out of high school chose to complete the requirements for a high school diploma and graduated. A third goal is to further understand the factors that either positively or negatively impact an at-risk student’s decision making process. More than 15% of students in the targeted community display at-risk attributes in academic performance, attendance, or behavior and roughly 80% of these students graduate (Public School X2 Database, 2012).

Through the research process this proposal will explore how each at-risk student moved through the decision making process, why they came to their ultimate decision, and what factors influenced their decision. These questions attempt to get at why at-risk students choose to dropout or remain in school until graduation and understand the context of the decision. This may also uncover unanticipated phenomena or influences that may be unique to the targeted community (Maxwell, 2005); and understand the process that students go through when deciding to remain in school and graduate or leave school and dropout.
With this in mind the three research questions for this study are as follows:

1. What factors do at-risk students at Franklin Park High School explain as impacting their decision to drop out or graduate from school?
2. What factors do other stakeholders see as impacting at-risk students’ decisions to drop out or remain in school?
3. What are significant commonalities and differences between what students say about their decision to drop-out or graduate and what other stakeholders believe?

Through investigation of these questions greater insight into what interventions are effective and ineffective for at-risk students may be considered.

**Theoretical Framework**

This research proposal will view the dropout issue through the lens of goal theory (Latham & Locke, 2006) and organizational theory (Hatch, 2006). Goal theory examines how an individual’s or organization’s goals impact behavior and the attainment of those goals (Latham & Locke, 2006). Students have a vested economic and social interest in high school completion. Examining factors that either positively or negatively impact the goal of high school graduation can illuminate the decision making process of individual students and may provide insight into how trends or patterns develop for groups of students. Understanding what a student’s goals are and the planning, effort, and execution of attaining those goals could provide data on effective and ineffective interventions for students at-risk of dropping out of school. Clearly school systems have an organizational interest in student retention and graduation. Schools and school personnel strive to ensure that a high percentage of students graduate. Organizational theory looks at the complex functioning of an organization and how a large number of factors impact outcomes and results (Walonick, 2010). Organizational theory is a valuable lens to view the
impact on school based variables on the dropout rate. These two theoretical frameworks provide contrasting forest and tree perspectives to view this problem of practice because they examine how the goals or aspirations of an individual impacts their educational outcomes and how an organization’s norms and culture effect the individuals within the organization and the potential attainment of their goals.

**Goal Theory.** Goal theory focuses on what an individual or organization wishes to accomplish. Goal theory is a psychological theory that looks at individual behavior (Latham & Locke, 2006). The goal that is the focus of this study is high school graduation. Studying how the at-risk students see and value their goals will open up interesting questions and data for interpretation. The goal theory lens can potentially be used in two ways when exploring the dropout issue. This includes looking at the goals of the at-risk students and the goals of the professionals who work with those students. Both students and educators share the same goal of either reaching or supporting high school graduation. Goal theory studies the mental processes of setting a goal (this is called goal acceptance) and how an individual moves from goal acceptance to either attaining or not attaining the accepted goal (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). Goal theory provides insight into how an individual places value on, sets, and enters the process of attaining the goal. The research demonstrates that specific goals with clear outcomes lead to a higher percentage of goal attainment (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). This dual lens of looking at the goal setting and attainment of at-risk students and how the organization supports this process can be useful. Goal theory clearly connects to the process of an at-risk student either choosing to work toward the requirements of achieving a high school diploma or dropping out.
A key concept in this theory is that goals are “immediate regulators of human action” (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981). Goal setting can positively impact whether an individual completes a task. The individual must be committed to attaining the goal and success can depend on the individual’s ability, feedback and support received during the process, and the complexity and difficulty of the goal itself (Seijts, Latham, Tasa, & Latham, 2004). Students who are engaged in the decision to either complete or dropout of high school also look at a number of factors when contemplating their decisions (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). A number of these internal and external variables can impact whether an individual is successful or unsuccessful in reaching their goals. This is similar to the concept of push-out and pull-out factors impacting the decisions of at-risk high school students (Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2008).

The importance of a clear, measurable goal and goal commitment cannot be understated. Without a clear and measurable goal, it can be nearly impossible to make a direct connection between goals and actions because of the variety of variables, human error, societal and environmental issues, and conscious and subconscious thought processes (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981; Locke, 1968). These variables are often complex and intertwined. Chester Barnard, an economist, couched the concept of goals into an organizational context. Barnard looked at how an organization could create incentives to promote behaviors that moved the organization forward and reduce barriers or burdens that inhibited individuals from reaching organizational goals (Barnhard, 1938, p. 139). Franklin Park High School has a vested, mission-based interest in student graduation rates. How are the school’s policies and practices impacting student retention and attrition rates?
Goal setting impacts results in at least four tangible ways: “by directing attention and action, mobilizing energy expenditure or effort, prolonging effort over time (persistence), and motivating the individual to develop relevant strategies for goal attainment.” (Locke, Shaw, Saari, & Latham, 1981, p. 145) This model can be used to interpret data and examine which factors are prominent or absent in the experiences and views of students. Current literature studying the drop out phenomenon also studies the importance of perseverance and persistence (Murray & Naranjo, 2008; Knesting, 2008; Knesting & Waldron, 2006). These studies explored the variables that improved school completion and the importance of persistence in at-risk students. Goal setting has clear advantages to task completion. Goal theory is a valuable lens because it provides a frame of reference for studying the decision making process of at-risk students and whether or not they set and attained the goal of graduating from high school. This indicates there may be value to any interventions that connect an at-risk student to both their long and short term goals. Individuals do not set and achieve goals in a vacuum; context is important and can influence whether an individual meets the goals she sets.

**Organizational theory.** Organization theory is the study of organizational designs and structures, the relationship of organizations with their external environment, and the behavior of managers and other personnel within organizations (Walonick, 2010). Organizational theory examines how organizations function and “how they affect and are affected by the environment in which they operate.” (Jones, 1998, p. 10) The lens of organizational theory can help to break down complex processes, variables, and interactions occurring within an organization and provide some meaning for a particular phenomenon. This theory can apply to business, politics, and cultural institutions (Hatch, 2006). Theorists come from a variety of fields and include thinkers such as Smith, Marx, Webber, Emery, Thompson, and Rorty among others (Hatch,
2006). It is important to note that there is not one overarching organizational theory, but a series of, at times, competing theories that attempt to explain and justify how organizations work and operate (Shafritz, Ott, & Jang, p. 1, 2011).

Organizational theory’s value for this particular study lies in how the at-risk student interacts within the context of the school’s organization; how the organizational norms and structures impact student decision making relating to the drop-out issue, and how personnel within the organization either positively or negatively impact at-risk student retention or attrition. An important question to study is how the school as an organization impacts the decision-making process of at-risk students. This can be particularly valuable for the proposed study by focusing on organizational factors that positively or negatively impact at-risk high school students’ decisions around school completion. How does the school’s programs, personnel, culture, and policies impact at-risk students’ decisions related to school completion?

At-risk students make the decision to drop-out or work toward the goal of graduation in the organizational context of the school. Researchers have looked at factors impacting student decision-making and categorized them into internal push-out factors and external pull-out factors (Knesting & Waldron, 2006). Organizational theory assists as a lens to examine these push-out factors discussed in the broader research. Critically viewing how schools and their personnel interact with and support at-risk students could provide insight into developing interventions or conditions where more students could be successful. How does the structure and cultural norms of an organization impact the decision making process and results of an at-risk student? Jones writes that organizational structure is, “the formal system of task and authority relationships that control how people coordinate their actions and use resources to achieve organizational goals.” (1998, p. 11) This complements the goal theory framework that focuses on the individual.
Schools and school systems are rules-based organizations that have bureaucratic norms, well defined roles of personnel and departments, and clear organizational goals.

The key goal of the organizational structure is control to achieve organizational goals (Jones, 1998). One of the goals of a school is to educate students. A high school is charged with educating students by ensuring that they meet all local and state requirements for graduation. In Massachusetts this includes passing state tests in the areas of English language arts, mathematics, and science in addition to meeting coursework requirements for graduation. Organizational structure also examines the incentives that organizations put in place to motivate people to meet organizational goals (Jones, 1998). Incentives often fall into one of several categories that include “material inducements, personal non-material opportunities; desirable physical conditions; or ideal benefactions.” (Barnard, 1938, p. 141) Incentives for employees in schools can occur through the salaries that they are paid or various recognitions. Schools differ from private industry in the incentives they are historically able to offer to employees. Similarly, students have the incentive of graduation and the benefits a formal education provides.

Organizational incentives have recently come with a stick based on the No Child Left Behind Act that provides first support and then sanctions for schools that do meet academic targets for student learning as a whole or students in specific sub-groups such as students with special needs or low income students.

Schools are organized around bureaucratic structures that are “governed by general, abstract, and clearly defined rules which preclude the necessity for the issuance of specific instructions for each specific case.” (Merton, 1957, p. 107) These rules and norms create predictability and often set clear expectations for the day to day operations and outcomes. Several researchers have examined the structure and organization of schools to determine their
impact on students dropping out of school. These researchers examined a variety of variables including size (Werblow & Duesbery, 2009), the internal organizational features of schools (Bryk & Thum, 1989), or curriculum and academic expectations (Lee & Burkham, 2000).

These bureaucratic structures and organizational variables impact educational outcomes such as student achievement, retention and attrition rates, and the future educational plans of students (Lee & Burkham, 2003). Clearly other variables outside of the organizations control also impact these educational outcomes such as cultural and socioeconomic factors (Education Commission of the States, 2007), but the impact of the organization can be considerable (Hatch, 2006).

The concept of power in organizational theory is an important one. Power relationships vary greatly in organizations. School organizations are often top-down bureaucracies led by a locally elected or appointed school committee or board and managed by a superintendent. School districts are commonly broken down into the smaller sub-units of schools, departments, and organized by grades. Power and authority are often organized around these lines, but there are also informal structures within organization that have different norms or power relationships than what is outlined in the organizational chart (Pheffer, 1981). These formal and informal power relationships help to set the course of the organization or school and determine what is valued and what is not valued. It may be useful to examine how these relationships impact school climate, culture, and ultimately student retention rates. Several questions immediately arise such as what value or importance does the school committee place on school completion; how do power relationships within the school and district impact the school climate or push students to leaving school prior to graduation. Additionally, power and the organization are interwoven with the individual goals of administrators, teachers, students, and parents. This intersection of organizational culture and norms and individual goals can often lead to where
these decisions of at-risk students are made to complete or dropout of school. Clearly other factors external to the school organization culture and structure impact that process, but it is without question that these are powerful forces.

Organizations have specific structures and almost an organizational personality. Most organizations can be defined as bureaucracies, and these organizations have both positive and negative characteristics. Many schools, like most organizations, tout their positive qualities and minimize their negative attributes. This is not uncommon for any organization (Merton, 1957). School climate that makes students feel that they are cared for, safe, and treated fairly is conducive to their developing a positive sense of belonging to school (Ma, 2003). This personality can encourage at-risk students to successfully meet all of the requirements for graduation or could push students out of the school and lead to higher student attrition rates.

The Education Commission of the States in 2007 found that, “schools can exert important organizational effects on students’ decision to drop out or stay in school.” These organizational effects include monitor student progress and intervene early; target attendance, behavior, and student engagement; ensure a strong academic focus; and review school structure (Education Commission of the States, 2007). All of these factors are influenced by the school as an organization. Organizational structures can ensure student progress is monitored and appropriate interventions are implemented when attendance, behavior, or academic indicators warrant it. Strong school cultures emphasize academics and messages are sent at every organizational level from the superintendent to the classroom. Every school district should study how their schools are structured and study how classroom size and other variables impact school climate and culture.
Connections between the two theoretical lenses. The two theoretical frameworks of goals theory and organizational theory work in concert to provide a lens to view the dropout phenomenon from the perspective of the individual and the organization. Goals are clearly important to the at-risk student who is determining whether or not to drop out of school and to the school organization that can be judged not only by academic performance, but also by graduation rates. The literature indicates the value and importance of goals, persistence, and resilience by the individual. Organizational theory looks at how the school, as a complex organization, can support individual students and groups of students who are at-risk toward graduation or detract from the ultimate goal of high school graduation. Both the individual student and the school influence behavior, setting and attainment of goals, and ultimately results. The behavior and goals of the individual and the organization are interconnected and influenced by both external and internal variables.

Summary of Research Design

The research design to address these questions is a qualitative case study. Maxwell outlines five intellectual goals that qualitative research is better suited to address. These intellectual goals include understanding meaning, understanding a particular context, identifying unanticipated phenomena and circumstances, understanding the process under which events or actions take place, and developing causal explanations for phenomena (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 22-23). The research questions look specifically at understanding the meaning of the thought processes of at-risk students in the specific context of Franklin Park High School. The study is focused on the decision making processes of six at-risk students. Three of the at-risk students chose to drop out of school, and three of the at-risk students chose to graduate from high school. The literature addressing the drop out phenomenon clearly suggests that the decision to drop out
is not a singular event, but a long term, complicated process. The combination of interviews with the at-risk students and a review of their records will help to understand the nuances of the decision making process each student underwent, understanding how both the school context and external variables impacted that decision making process, and how various factors influenced the student’s decision and ultimate educational outcome. Qualitative research best addresses this process.

The researcher interviewed and reviewed the school records of two groups of at-risk students. The two groups should provide a useful contrast; one group of at-risk students who persisted through graduation and the second group of at-risk students who chose to drop out. Additionally, focus groups will be held to get the perspectives of school and district level administrators, teachers, and counselors. This provides a combination of perspectives that includes the at-risk students themselves and the faculty that works both directly and indirectly with the students. A review of retention and attrition data from the past five years at Franklin Park High School will also be completed. Analysis and interpretation of this data yielded a number of themes that provided valuable information for practitioners and could lead to additional questions for future research.
Chapter II: Literature Review

Introduction

There is a significant body of literature focusing on the drop out phenomenon. The literature that addresses the high school dropout phenomenon falls into three main categories: (1) why students’ dropout of high school, (2) the impact of dropping out of high school on the individual and society, and (3) interventions that improve student retention and decrease the number of students dropping out of high school. Researchers have employed both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore the dropout phenomenon. The qualitative studies often focus on the reasons and conditions that cause students to decide to drop out and leave school prior to graduation. The quantitative studies look at macro or micro trends that often depend on the scope of the study and the size of the samples. The existing knowledge that is available in the literature can offer multiple perspectives to better understand this phenomenon in the particular context of a suburban high school in northeastern Massachusetts.

This review of recent research will first look at which types of communities researchers focus on when studying the drop out phenomenon and why students drop out. Next, an exploration of the impact on dropping out on the individual and society will be explored. This will be followed by a review of interventions at the national and local levels. A review of some of the literature focused on student goals and resilience will follow. Next the literature review will address the impact of the school as an organization on the dropout issue. Following this is a review of several qualitative studies on at-risk students. Most of the research establishing factors for why students drop out of school use quantitative methods. It is also valuable to look at what previous qualitative work was completed examining the drop out phenomenon.
Low Incidence Dropout Communities

There is a great deal in literature focused on urban students, racial minorities, and schools that are identified as dropout factories. Many of the nation’s school districts have a very low incidence of students dropping out of school. This accounts for why the large urban districts where there are the highest rates of students dropping out account for much of the policy and research attention. The state dropout rate is less than four percent per year in Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011). Comparatively approximately fifty-nine percent of students in the top fifty urban districts graduate (Swanson, 2009). This large differential in graduation rates clearly shows inequities that exist between urban and suburban schools. What accounts for this vast difference in graduation rates? There is a direct correlation between educational attainment, employment, and wages; conversely in cities, where there are higher levels of poverty and unemployment there also tends to be lower levels of educational attainment and higher numbers of high school dropouts in the adult population (Swanson, 2009). Poverty is directly related to income and employment, and educational attainment increases the likelihood of employment and is positively correlated to higher wages (Swanson, 2009).

Despite these differences in quality, poverty level of families, and educational attainment, a cohort of students is consistently leaving suburban high schools prior to graduation. In suburban schools where the expectation is that students will at a minimum earn a diploma, students still fail to meet this requirement. The literature finds that suburban students often drop out for the same reasons students in other settings do (Rumberger, 2001; Shaw Anderson & Leal Umuth, 2008). Suburban students leave because of family issues, lack of engagement in the school community, and lack of success of in the school environment. Studies also cite home
support for academics and drug abuse (Cunningham, 2007). At Franklin Park High School located in northeastern Massachusetts about three percent of students each year choose to leave school prior to completion.

Suburban students often are enrolled in schools where the graduation rates are high and there are clear and consistent expectations. Suburban school personnel need to value each student in the school community and work to support students who are at-risk of dropping out of school. These school systems tend to have lower rates of school suspension and grade retention and higher rates of student attendance and both four year and two year student acceptance and enrollment rates after graduation (Rumberger & Thomas, 2001). Students still become disengaged in school and leave in suburban communities across the country. Suburban school graduation rates are high and the dropout rates are typically low, but each student who leaves early incurs a tremendous individual and societal cost. The dropout phenomenon in these suburban low-dropout communities requires further study.

**Why Students Dropout**

The question of why students drop out is critical to this study. This question is often studied in an urban environment where there are a significant percentage of students leaving school prior to graduation. The factors are often complex and the decision to exit school prior to graduation is the culminating process of a long period of disengagement from the school environment (Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). There are a number of factors that contribute to why a student drops out of high school including family income, parent’s educational attainment, learning or emotional disabilities, connection to the school or community, race, region within the country, and whether or not there is an invested adult in the student’s life (Katz, 1999; Garza, 2006; Greene, 2002; Pew Hispanic Center, 2005; Swanson; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009; U.S.
Department of Education, 2002; Velez and Saenz, 2001). The impact of severe poverty cannot be understated and many of the nation’s dropouts come from large urban districts in communities that are faced by significant economic hardship (Swanson, 2010). It is important to note that many of the at-risk students at Franklin Park High School are identified as low income or receiving special education services.

Two striking statistics that impact graduation include the ability to read and poverty. Students who do not read on grade level by grade three are four times more likely to dropout and students who are not reading on grade level and living in poverty are thirteen times more likely to drop out of school (Sparks, 2011). The impact of poverty on high school graduation is significant. In the Massachusetts high school that is the focus of the study, low income students are more likely to drop out than their peers; this is consistent with the research. There are also differences in completion rates based on gender and race. A quick look at national 2007 data shows that females graduate at higher rates than males; whites graduate at higher rates than African American, American Indian, or Hispanic students (Swanson, 2010). This is also consistent with data from the suburban high school at the center of this study (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012).

Some factors are universal in predicting the likelihood of whether or not a student is at-risk for dropping out. These factors include educational performance, behaviors, attitudes and personal or psychological characteristics, adult responsibilities, school or neighborhood characteristics, and background (Rumberger & Lim, 2008; Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Educational performance includes achievement (or lack thereof); student retention in elementary, middle, or high school; and the student’s mobility (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Clearly poor performance and any interruption to a student’s academic career can cause greater risk of
dropping out. Student educational performance can be closely linked to behaviors that foster school success and attitudes toward the importance and value of school and education.

As stated previously, the ability to read and access curriculum is critically important to school engagement, and the inability to read can increase a student’s risk of not completing school in the future. Behaviors that indicate a higher likelihood of non-completion include lack of school engagement, absences, drug and alcohol use, pregnancy, or connections with friends who engage in illegal activities or have dropped out themselves (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Attitudes are directly connected to expectations and students who are held to consistent higher expectations are less likely to drop out (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). A student’s attitude toward school is also important. Students who were seen as disruptive and had a poor attitude toward school were found to have a greater chance in the future of dropping out of school themselves (Vitaro, Laroque, Janosz, & Tremblay, 2001). At-risk students who complete school often see a high school diploma as a valuable goal that is worth attaining. Perseverance is a characteristic often cited in the literature that can lead an at-risk student toward graduation and away from making the decision to leave school before graduation (Knesting, 2008). There is a clear connection between student engagement, academic performance, and perseverance (Hundley, Polanco, Wright-Castro & Hershberg, 2003).

Adult responsibilities can also lead students away from the formal school setting. The need to work to support their family or dependent children can pull students away from the school setting (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Pregnancy is also often cited as a reason why female students leave school and do not return (Gleason & Dynarski, 2002). Background involves family educational attainment and support among other factors (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). These factors are often interrelated and combine to either increase or decrease the likelihood of a
student completing school. These are pull out factors that clearly can move students away from high school graduation.

Academic ability is not always an indicator of future school success. One study examined a population of gifted students in the northeast, and found that even among the gifted population 1% of the students drop out (Matthews, 2006). This could account for as many as 17.6% of the overall drop out population (Matthews, 2006, p. 4). Gifted students followed a similar pattern of the general population and cited attendance problems, discipline problems, leaving school for a job, or leaving for community college or to obtain a GED (Matthews, 2006, p. 10). Even students who are academically able can struggle with external factors that pull them away from school or internal school-related factors that push them out. The process is clearly complex and involves multiple variables.

Any disruption to school attendance or progression can be problematic for at-risk students and impact completion. Student retention or being held back in a particular grade also impacts high school completion (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). Chronic attendance issues are also seen as a clear risk factor for eventually dropping out of school (Sparks, 2010). This data can be interpreted in a number of ways. Students who struggle can lose interest and hope in the educational process or outside responsibilities are pulling them away from school and limiting their chances for completion. In many cases, it is probably a combination of a lack of connection to the school environment and outside factors contributing to these trends of students choosing to leave school before graduating. Students who are retained drop out at much higher rates than those who are promoted or transferred to the next grade.
A 2009 study of teachers and principals indicates that there is a significant expectations gap and many educators do not believe that at-risk students can overcome family or social issues, gaps in skills, or low motivation (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2009). There are significant racial and gender gaps (Swanson, 2003; Greene & Winters, 2005). Historically disadvantaged groups often have approximately a “50-50 chance” of graduating and males drop out at a higher rate than females by almost eight percent (Swanson, 2003). Students with multiple risk factors are more likely to dropout than students that only display one or two risk factors (Rumberger, 2001). Often students do not understand the impact that their decision will have on their life either economically or socially. School personnel can sometimes lose sight of the importance that a high school diploma for each individual has for the community and the drain on public resources a non-completer represents to society.

**Impact of Dropping-Out on the Individual and Society**

The impact of dropping out on the individual and society cannot be minimized. As stated in previous sections, there are clear economic impacts on the local, state, and national economies for the collective decisions of students that drop out of high school (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; Greene, 2002; Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Sum, 2007; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). In 2008 if the dropout rate were cut in half the additional graduates could have generated, “4.1 billion more in wages and 536 million in one average year of their working lives.” (Gerwetz, 2008) Greene writes,

Students who fail to graduate from high school face a very bleak future. Because the basic skills conveyed in high school and higher education are essential for success in today’s economy, students who do not receive these skills are likely to suffer with significantly reduced earnings and employment prospects (2002, p. 16).
Earning a high school diploma can increase the prospects of steady employment by approximately 30% (Swanson, 2009). There is increased pressure on students and the nation as a whole because of the rate of change associated with technology and the increasing competitiveness of the global society (Dede, 2007; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). In addition links have been made to educational attainment and health (Freudenberg & Ruglis, 2007). This only adds to the social costs of students dropping out of high school.

It is not surprising that students who did not complete their high school education were least likely to either attend or complete any type of post-secondary school education program (Finn, 2006). Students who were identified as being at-risk for dropping out but completed high school fared significantly better than those students who did not complete high school in terms of academic attainment. Almost 61% of students identified as at-risk entered some sort of post-secondary education and 47% of those students completed either a two year or a four year degree (Finn, 2006). This is encouraging and demonstrates the importance of supporting students’ perseverance and goals. Similarly to high school students, at-risk students’ attendance, punctuality, and work ethic all were factors that predicted whether or not an at-risk student would enter or complete some sort of post-secondary educational program (Finn, 2006, pp. 12-14). Programs or interventions that support student goal development and perseverance throughout the educational process should be explored.

**Impact of Interventions on the Dropout Rate**

There are a number of studies that examine the impact of interventions for reducing the high school drop-out rate and improving retention rates. It is important to note that these interventions have been largely unsuccessful on a grand scale. Despite billions of dollars invested by the federal, state, and local governments and private foundations, a lower percentage
of high school students earned a diploma than they did forty years ago (Rumberger, 2011). Researchers have found that clearly identifying students who are at-risk for dropping out early and providing interventions prior to entering high school are critical (Sparks, 2010). Gleason and Dynarski found that interventions programs, “often serve students who would not have dropped out, and do not serve students who would have dropped out, which has implications for program effectiveness.” (2003, p. 25) Viewing risk factors through a narrow lens and identifying students based on one risk factor also may not be particularly effective. Students with multiple risk factors, typically displaying four or more, were 18% more likely to drop-out (Gleason & Dynarski, 2003, p. 33). Britt wrote,

Weaknesses of intervention programs include that these programs are often developed based on funding rather than student need, most programs are not integrated into the general school setting, lack of attention to the social/emotional needs of students, greater focus needs to be paid to primary grades, little focus on bringing students back who have already dropped-out, little attention to at-risk students’ negative perceptions of school (1995, p. 12).

Policies that focus on students that demonstrate multiple risk factors, are tied to needs rather than funding, and address the multiple variables that impact the student decision making process may be more effective.

One historical issue that created complications for macro solutions to addressing the dropout issue was creating common definitions for dropouts and calculations for determining graduation rates. These varied methods for defining dropouts and calculating graduation rates allowed states and local districts to manipulate data, hide dropouts, and created a wide range of calculations for state and national graduation statistics. A common methodology could clearly
frame the issue and provide for a consistent national discussion around the problem. This would allow for apples to apples comparisons, develop consistent statistics, and allow for accurate comparisons across states and districts. In 2008 U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings presented a policy that would require states to calculate graduation rates in an identical manner (Almeida & Steinberg, 2008). This may not sound like a revolutionary policy, but it will allow researchers and policy makers to make true comparisons that were not previously possible.

At the national level policy could encourage higher retention rates through redefining high school success, provide incentives to educate all students, build system wide capacity, desegregate schools, pathways to graduation and college for students who are no longer attending traditional high schools, turnaround low performing schools, early and continuous intervention for struggling students, and strengthen families and communities (Rumberger, 2011; Almeida & Steinberg, 2008). Currently federal accountability standards only test a narrow set of cognitive skills and abilities that focus almost exclusively on reading and math (Rumberger, 2011). College and career readiness is a closely related area of state focus that complements the state and federal accountability standards (Swanson, 2010). Some studies argue that building and increasing career and college readiness will lower the dropout rate and increase economic opportunity (Almeida & Steinberg, 2008). Under current federal guidelines that define graduation rates transfer students do not count in the calculations. This gives schools an incentive to push struggling students to transfer to alternative schools or programs. This practice was highlighted in a study of the impact of the Texas high stakes testing and accountability program. Schools in Texas receive a grade or ranking and schools that effectively “triaged” out struggling students through various zero tolerance attendance or discipline policies tended to
improve their standing in the rating system (McNeil, Copolla, Radigan, & Vasquez Helig, 2008, p. 36).

This practice also occurs in the Merrimack Valley in Massachusetts where Franklin Park High School is located. A charter school serves students who have previously dropped out of their local public school. The Lowell Middlesex Academy Charter School dropout rate has exceeded 30% in eight of the last nine years (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2011). This dropout rate is consistently nearly ten times higher than the suburban school districts in the surrounding area. These numbers are less a factor of the quality of the educational experience at the school and more indicative of the population the school serves. Federal and state policies to improve retention also often require schools to make rapid changes for a short period of time, but these policies do not build long term capacity for lasting change. Turning around low performing schools is often cited in the literature, but there are few examples of success stories through state intervention or accountability triggers (Rumberger, 2011; Almeida & Steinberg, 2008). Early and continuous intervention is a common theme for identifying and addressing at-risk students (Almeida & Steinberg, 2008; Spark, 2010). Programs that collect actionable data and respond to student needs can increase academic success and student retention. Rumberger also emphasizes the importance of the local communities and families and the organizations and structures that support them (2011). There is a clear connection between parent involvement and student success and any programs that encourage parent involvement and increased efficacy can potentially positively impact student retention (Wilson, 2010). Parents can be that concerned adult and students with parents who are engaged in the school community are less likely to drop out of school. Schools alone cannot solve the
dropout issue and much research cites both external and internal causes for students dropping out of high school.

At the local and school level a number of interventions have also been cited. One key area of success is when there is an identified and concerned adult in the life of a student (Katz, 1999; Garza, 2006; Hundley, Polanco, Wright-Castro, & Hershberg, 2003). These concerned adults often support the student’s goal of high school completion and provide guidance when external factors pull a student away from the completion of their goal or internal school factors begin to push a student toward dropping out. Tyler and Loftstrom in a 2009 study cite the importance of mentoring and relationships with key adults or teachers, family outreach, attention to students’ out of school issues, and reforms to curriculum (Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009).

Second chance programs such as district-based credit recovery programs and the GED program can contribute to a student getting back on track. The Franklin Park Public Schools offer a number of services that support students and improve retention. Some districts, such as the Westwood Community School District in suburban Detroit, are offering online alternatives like the Westwood Cyber High School (Davis, 2010). The program targets at-risk students or students who have already dropped out and offers them an alternative to the traditional high school experience. The program is very popular with enrollment tripling since inception and the district as a whole has increased enrollment by thirty-three percent (Davis, 2010). Local policies that provide second chances and offer flexibility tend to be more successful than programs that are punitive and offer zero tolerance for various types of behavior (McNeil, Copolla, Radigan, & Vasquez Helig, 2008). Online programs, credit recovery programs, and traditional GED programs encourage future educational attainment and improve long term economic outcomes.
Districts are also focusing on school attendance throughout a student’s academic career. Districts often begin programs in the primary grades to monitor attendance and intervene when negative trends arise (Sparks, 2010). Schools and districts often identify triggers that will result in a series of interventions related to improving school attendance for the student. This research will examine how these types of interventions and supports impact the decision making process of a student. There is also value in determining if there is a connection between schools or school districts that focus on interventions and provide strong supports and students dropping out of schools. Each of these bodies of research is connected and can provide additional insight into the factors that contribute to an at-risk student’s decision to leave school or persevere and graduate.

Overall a combination of interventions is necessary to positively impact graduation rates. A review of local and national interventions completed by noted researchers Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, and Smink concluded that diagnostic interventions such as the creation of national or state-wide systems that identify students who are at-risk for dropping out in the future are probably the least effective (2008). Targeted interventions at the school level such as connecting students with a concerned adult, providing extra help with the goal of improving academic performance, or programs to improve student behavior or socialization can have a moderate to low impact on improving graduation rates (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008). Similarly, school-wide interventions that personalize the learning environment and engage students in the learning process and provide a curriculum that provides skills for college and work readiness can also moderately impact a school’s graduation rate (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008). It is important to emphasize that
the author’s believe that a series of coordinated interventions are most appropriate to address this complex problem.

**At-Risk Students and Resilience**

A study of learning disabled students in Chicago looked at the concept of resilience and the goal orientation of students. The dropout rate for students with learning disabilities in Chicago is approximately twenty-five percent annually (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). The researchers found that self-determination, willingness to seek support, the value of education, parental involvement and structure, self-isolation, and assistance from special education were all key variables when looking at a student’s likelihood of completing school and graduating (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Clearly a student’s self-determination, resilience, and value placed on education are important. Setting goals, creating manageable steps that lead to goal completion, accessing appropriate support, and placing value of the end result all contribute to goal attainment. It is also clear that at-risk students require support from concerned adults that could include family members, teachers, counselors, or community mentors. It is unclear if these same characteristics are present in at-risk students in a suburban communities who often are less likely to live in poverty and attend schools where the expectations to graduate are often higher.

The concept of persistence appears in the literature when discussing student goals as they relate to school completion. Researchers have looked at what factors lead at-risk students to greater school success and completion rates. Knesting and Waldron write,

Three interactive factors appear critical to these students’ persistence: (a) goal orientation—students’ belief they will benefit from graduating, (b) willingness to play the game—students’ willingness to follow school rules, and (c) meaningful connections—
relationships with teachers who believed students could graduate and provided support and caring (2006, p. 604).

The goal orientation piece is critical here. Students must see the value and importance of school completion. In other words, the goal of high school graduation must be clear and the value placed on school completion essential. Again, goals alone are not enough and students require the support of a concerned adult who is invested in the student’s success. Goal theory is a valuable theoretical lens to examine at-risk students and their educational outcomes in relation to school completion, but goals need to be connected to a student’s willingness to work to achieve the goal and the ability to access support to meet the goal.

**Impact of the School Organization and Size on the Dropout Rate**

Organizations also have goals that are commonly reflected in mission statements or organizational visions. These missions and visions often explain why the organization exists and what the organization should be accomplishing on a daily, monthly, and yearly basis (Jones, 1998, p. 30). The dropout phenomenon is the intersection of organizational and individual goals. The mission of schools is to educate students and individual students typically have aspirations for the future. When a student drops out of school, the school is failing to realize its mission of educating a student to the point of completion or graduation.

Organizations can positively impact student retention. In a study completed in California researchers found,

four overarching themes emerged from the interviews: (1) connecting with and engaging students; (2) Engaging parents and community members to support school efforts; (3) providing interventions and supports to students at risk of dropping out; and (4) creating a
culture of accountability and high expectations (Socias, Dunn, Parrish, Muraki, & Woods, 2007, pp. 17-19).

Schools that reach out and engage students and families positively impact graduation rates. This is a team effort that requires a coordinated approach by teachers, counselors, administrators, and support staff. The team needs to extend beyond the school and reach out to community organizations that can support efforts of students and families outside of school. Engagement and reaching out alone is often not enough to impact students who are considering leaving school; schools need to provide effective interventions such as counseling programs, credit recovery programs, and alternative paths to graduation. The curriculum and the structure of the school also impact graduation rates. Schools with more rigorous curriculum and strong connections between faculty and students have better results than schools that lack these factors.

Organizational behavior can also impact graduation rates. A study conducted in Kentucky found that the suspension rate, attendance rate, law violation rate, and retention rate of students in high schools can affect the dropout rate (Christle, Jolivette, & Nelson, 2007). Additionally, the socioeconomic status of families attending the school and the student achievement of the students in the school impact the dropout rates. Schools with lower suspension and retention rates and higher attendance rates typically had higher graduation rates when controlled for the economic status of the families attending the school. This would indicate that schools should look closely at their discipline, attendance, and promotion policies.

School sizes impacts the dropout rate. Large schools have greater dropout rates than medium or very large schools (Education Commission of the United States, 2007). It is easier for students who are anonymous or perceive themselves as anonymous to leave school. While small schools of less than 600 students have the lowest dropout rates (Education Commission of
the United States, 2007). In a smaller environment it is more difficult not to be known by school personnel. It is valuable for larger schools to create connections between students and faculty and to create the feeling of “smallness”. Obviously this oversimplifies the impact of size on the graduation rates, but strategies must be put in place in larger schools to counteract the negative impact size has on retention in public high schools. Werblow found that, “A quintile increase in school size is associated with a 12% increase in average student dropout rate.” (2009, p. 19) Although small schools positively impact graduation rates, it is questionable whether they have the same positive correlation for learning outcomes (Werblow, 2009, p. 20).

The type of school also matters as retention varies across public and private schools and rural, urban, and suburban schools (Education Commission of the United States, 2007). Although other factors may be at work in private schools such as economic resources and engagement of families. The type of community a school is located in also impacts graduation rates. For example, schools located in rural communities had a 30% higher student attrition rate than their suburban counterparts (Werblow, 2009, p. 19). An even greater predictor than location or type of school is the socioeconomic status of the school population. Werblow writes that, “for every 10% increase in students on free and reduced lunch, schools experience a small but significant increase in student dropout rate.” (2009, p. 19) The location and type of community are impacted by the socioeconomic characteristics of the people residing in the community.

In 1989 Bryk and Thum wrote that, “the internal organizational features of schools can have significant educative consequences for all students, and especially at-risk youth.” Some of these factors include a safe and orderly environment, many informal opportunities for adult and student interactions, teachers who are committed to supporting student success, and a clear and well developed academic program and curriculum (Bryk & Thum, 1989, p. 25). The idea of a
concerned adult is a consistent theme in the literature and a key element of a supportive academic environment. Other studies examined the impact of organizational size on the student dropout rate (Werblow & Duesbery, 2009). Here again, if a student is anonymous and there are no adults “looking out” for their interests, attrition rates can be higher (Werblow & Duesbery, 2009). Quantitative studies have also looked at how a school organizes their curriculum and academic expectations and social organization (Lee & Burkham, 2000). Again support and clear expectations are indicators of student success as measured by graduation rates. In the next section, the literature review will further explore the relationship between the school dropout phenomenon and the school as an organization.

**Qualitative Studies that Examine the Decision Making Processes of At-Risk Students**

Researchers have used qualitative methodology to explore how individual students approach decisions related to dropping out or remaining in school. The qualitative approach looks at the how and why behind a particular phenomenon. These studies often explore the factors and process that contribute to a student’s decision. Researchers often cite that dropping out is a process and not an event (Rumberger, 2001). Understanding this process can bring tremendous insight into how to approach the dropout phenomenon. This can lead practitioners to improve their approach and interventions for students who are at risk of dropping out. Researchers in qualitative studies can look closely at the decisions of at-risk students and their consequences. This may provide particular value in developing interventions using the concept of pull versus push factors (Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2008).

Knesting looked at the concept of perseverance and identified four factors that emerged as critical for supporting student persistence: “(a) listening to students, (b) communicating caring, (c) the school’s role in dropout prevention, and (d) students’ role in dropout prevention”
These are similar conclusions that Werblow arrived at when looking at the structure and organization of the school and its relation to the dropout rate (2009). At-risk students felt that school personnel did not understand their problems or what they were going through and most importantly were not listening. Some students believed that if the school actively reached out that they may not have dropped out at all (Knesting, 2008).

Researching and reviewing how the economic benefits of a high school diploma are communicated to students could provide insight into how students perceive their choices as they relate to their futures (Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2008). Knesting and Waldron found that students cited, “a better life, financial independence, continuing their education, and avoiding the consequences of dropping out as reasons to remain in school and graduate.” (2006, p. 604) In one study pregnancy was the number one reason listed why students left high school before completion. This could warrant further exploration (Meeker, Edmonson, & Fisher, 2008).

Students clearly value support when they are struggling. In one study focused on urban students in Chicago students cited self-determination, willingness to seek support, the value of education, parental involvement and structure, self-isolation, and assistance from special education (Murray & Naranjo, 2008). Students who do not feel a sense of belonging in school often seek affirmation from other groups such as gangs or engage in other risk taking behaviors such as drug and alcohol use (Lee & Breen, 2007). This reaffirms the importance of engaging students in the school community and the value of connections with concerned adults and positive peer groups. Students were bored with school and felt that school personnel did not care for them (Britt, 1995). Students feel isolated and unsupported at school and in the home environment (Britt, 1995). Britt recommended the importance of intervention well before high school. This is consistent throughout the literature and born out in quantitative studies as well.
Summary

The dropout rate is a complex phenomenon. The individual, the family, the school, and the community all impact how an at-risk student perceives the importance of education and whether or not to persevere and graduate from high school. The literature outlines why students leave, the impact of dropping out of high school on the individual and society, and interventions that improve student retention and decrease the number of students dropping out of high school. The literature provides a clear outline of the problem; the significance the dropout issue has on the students who do not complete high school, their families, and society; and interventions and strategies to improve educational outcomes for students. Despite all this research and data students continue to drop out of schools at high rates.
Chapter III: Research Design

Introduction

This qualitative study focuses on why at-risk students decide to either drop out or remain in school until graduation in a particular, semi-wealthy community in Massachusetts. First this section presents the research questions that drive the study. The questions explore the reasons why at-risk students perceive that they either drop out or persevere and graduate and how stakeholders perceive what influences those decisions. The next section focuses on the methodology and why this methodology is most appropriate for this study. This is followed by a discussion of the site and participants. The site of Franklin Park High School is noteworthy because it is a low incidence drop out community that nearly mirrors the state percentages of drop outs each year. The next section outlines the data collection process. Next, there is a presentation of the issues particular to this study related to validity and credibility. This follows an outline of the limitations of the study. Finally, the last section describes how the researcher protected human subjects who volunteered to participate in this study.

Research Questions

Qualitative research focuses on understanding the particular meaning of a phenomenon and the context of a specific setting. This study is attempting to determine why at-risk students make particular decisions within the context of Franklin Park High School and what factors impact those decisions. There are many quantitative studies that identify trends relating to the dropout rate and many qualitative studies that look at the drop-out rate in the context of a high drop-out rate school environment. The goal of this study is to examine the process at-risk students undertake when deciding to persevere and graduate or drop out of school in a low attrition educational setting and what factors impact those decisions. Much of the research has focused on high incidence drop out communities; this study is focused on the decision making
processes of at-risk students in the low incidence drop out community of Franklin Park, Massachusetts. The questions this study will answer include:

1. What factors do at-risk students at Franklin Park High School explain as impacting their decision to drop out or graduate from school?

2. What factors do other stakeholders see as impacting at-risk students’ decisions to drop out or remain in school?

3. What are significant commonalities and differences between what students say about their decision to drop-out or graduate and what other stakeholders believe?

Through this study these questions may provide insight into what interventions are effective and ineffective for at-risk students who are considering dropping out of school. These process questions will be answered through the implementation of a case study methodology. Baxter and Jack (2008) write,

rigorous qualitative case studies afford researchers opportunities to explore or describe a phenomenon in context using a variety of data sources. It allows the researcher to explore individuals or organizations, simple through complex interventions, relationships, communities, or programs and supports the deconstruction and the subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena (p. 544).

These data sources include interviews with at-risk students from Franklin Park High School, school faculty, and administrators. Additionally a review of student records and school data was conducted.

The first question will require exploring the issue with at-risk students who have both graduated and dropped out prior to completing high school. This question identifies the at-risk students being studied and purposefully provides opportunities for those participants to discuss
what factors impacted their decision to drop out or persevere. This will involve semi-structured interviews and a review of student records. The second question will require interviews with school-based stakeholders including central office administration, school-based administration, teachers, counselors, and related service providers. The faculty provides a broader perspective on the dropout phenomenon in a low incidence drop out community. Additionally, the second question will require an examination of school data to review trends related to graduation rates, drop out statistics, and post-secondary plans. The third questions allows for a comparison between the at-risk students and the school personnel.

Methodology

A qualitative case study is appropriate based on the type of process questions that this study is exploring. Qualitative research looks at, “particular events, situations and processes that are located in specific and single social and cultural settings” than “general phenomena that are presumed to apply in relatively similar ways across particular situations and contexts.” (Bermudez, 2010) Delving deep into a particular context that has been explored on a limited basis in the literature provides valuable insight to future policy makers and practitioners to develop appropriate interventions and responses. The thrust of this research is focused on the why and how of a decision-making process of at-risk students attending the Franklin Park Public Schools. The goal is to learn why the students made their decision, what influenced that decision, and how they reached the decision. Examining a small sample of at-risk students who chose to drop-out or remain in school to graduate will provide the in-depth data this study requires.

Data was collected through a series of interviews and a review of the records of at-risk students who were recent graduates and drop-outs of the Franklin Park Public Schools and
school personnel who work directly with these students. The data collected from this process may provide insight into the factors that contribute to an at-risk student’s decision to either graduate from high school or drop out. The data collection process will yield information that was analyzed through the lens of the research questions and the theoretical lenses outlined previously.

The case study methodology, “investigates complex real-life social phenomena within its natural setting.” (Yin, 2009) Examining how recent at-risk students from Franklin Park High School explain their decision to either drop-out or complete school and discuss the decision-making process and the factors that contributed to their decision could best be captured by the case study method. Yin describes a case study as an empirical inquiry that, “Investigates a contemporary phenomenon in depth and within its real-life context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident” (Yin, 2009). There are a significant number of characteristics that could be unique to the at-risk students participating in the study and the setting of Franklin Park High School. The case study method provides an opportunity to gain an in-depth insight both into the decision making process of the students and their experience within the context that may not fit into pre-designed categories or responses.

The case study methodology advances the intellectual and practical goals of the study by allowing the researcher to explore a topic in an in-depth manner that answers the why and how questions. The case study would look into how students experience those causal factors and how they make meaning of them and their influence. The goal is to carefully look at the decision-making process of a small group of at-risk students in the town of Franklin Park. Interviewing students who recently experienced the decision-making process provides a depth to the study that goes beyond the identification of trends. Understanding why and how students make the
decision to stay in school or drop-out can inform the district where to focus limited resources. Additionally, gaining the perspectives of school personnel creates a more complete picture of the context. The district currently provides a number of interventions and supports for students who are at-risk of dropping out of school. This study may provide valuable feedback on the efficacy of the programs and where to increase or decrease efforts.

There are many advantages of using the case study method. Case studies can provide a detailed and in-depth analysis of a phenomenon in its natural setting (Yin, 2005). Conducting this study within the environment and context where students are making decisions will add to the potential depth of the analysis. It is important to collect data for this research in a natural setting rather than pulling from “derived data” (Yin, 2005); the methodology will include a review of students’ school records; interviews with students; and focus groups with administrators, teachers, and counselors that worked with the students. Case studies answer the process questions that are proposed in the research above (Yin, 2009) and “describe, illustrate or explain the process and/or mechanism of a phenomenon.” (Bermudez, 2010) The case study method is also applicable when examining the decision-making processes of students because the researcher has, “little or no control over behavioral events or factors within it.” (Bermudez, 2010)

Some challenges of the case study method include the researchers bias interfering with data collection, understanding and balancing the intricacies of the case and data collection, selection of the “right” case, avoid mixing evidence and interpretation, little to no ability to make broad generalizations, and potential for lengthy and poorly written documents (Yin, 2009). The personal bias issue may be the most difficult to overcome because of the researchers experience in the district and potential personal ties to the faculty and the families. It is critical throughout
the process to explore the researcher’s bias when interviewing or reviewing records.

Maintaining a focus on the research questions also provide feasible limits and a clear direction for the research project.

Yin writes that a researcher needs to develop, “a “blueprint” for research, dealing with at least four problems: what questions to study, what data are relevant, what data to collect, and how to analyze the results.” (Yin, 2009) Using the case study methodology the researcher can effectively develop a narrative that will answer the research questions through interviews with students, teachers, and counselors and a review of school records. The research is focused on a single case study/one site (Bermudez, 2010) research process using Franklin Park High School as the setting. Qualitative case studies can also identify causal factors, but they focus on understanding their mechanism: how is it that they influence the result (decision to drop out or remain in school) (Bermudez, 2010). The case study methodology allows the researcher to present a level of detailed analysis that can analyze the nuances of an at-risk teenage student’s thought process.

Site and Participants

The Franklin Park Public Schools is the setting for the research. One factor in selecting an appropriate research site is the ability to access all appropriate and necessary information. The researcher already has access as an administrator in the school system and has positive relationships with many of the gatekeepers (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 82-87). This positive relationship and access has benefits when selecting a sample of students to research. When selecting a sample it is important to consider “achieving representativeness or typicality” of the setting; capturing the “heterogeneity” in the population; “deliberately examine cases that are critical for theories that you began the study with”; and to establish “purposeful comparisons”
that may establish reasons for differences (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 88-90). This involves drawing students from different cultural groups, males and females, students who participated and did not participate in extracurricular groups, and students who left early in their academic career and those students who left as upper classmen. Using these considerations for selecting a sample allows for a number of useful comparisons including how various individuals and groups perceived what they expected or did not expect from school.

The relationship with the research participants was professional and relatively brief (based on the length of the interviews and review of the research findings and analysis). Participants were allowed and encouraged to read the study and make recommendations to the project. This process served as a check on the accuracy of their information and provided the researcher with the opportunity to fill in any gaps in the process or data (Creswell, 2009). The researcher ensured the validity of the research through “triangulation of data, member checking, regular and repeated observations of the research site, peer examination, participant involvement in the questions and follow-up questions, and clarification of researcher bias.” (Creswell, 2009, pp. 199-200) For this study the triangulation of data emanated from the series of interviews completed with the sample of students and teachers, the review of student records, and the review of the data and the study with the participants (Creswell, 2009). The researcher engaged participants in member checking throughout the analysis process. Creswell writes, “An ongoing dialogue of regarding my interpretations of the informant’s reality and meanings will ensure the truth value of the data.” (Creswell, 2009, p. 199) This required several contacts with participants throughout the research process.
**Data Collection**

Data collection occurred through a series of open ended semi-structured interviews with at-risk students who graduated and dropped out of school; analysis of student records and documents; and semi-structured focus group interviews with central office administrators, school-based administrators, guidance counselors, and teachers. The interview as a data collection method has several advantages including providing information that cannot be directly observed and allowing the researcher control and direction related to particular lines of questioning (Creswell, 2009). Interviews also have limitations that include the bias of the participants’ experiences and memories, lack of data collected in the actual setting, variability in the ability of different participants to articulately answer responses, and the impact of researcher presence on participants’ responses (Creswell, 2009, p. 179). The review of student record documents has similar advantages and disadvantages. The quality of student records can vary over time and vary between participants.

Data collection occurred over a period of approximately six months to ensure that other factors are not at work and the data collection process is valid (Creswell, 2009). Peer examination will help to ensure the process is valid and rigorous. Participants were invited to review and engage in a dialogue throughout the research process (Creswell, 2009). Accounting for and clarification of researcher bias during the research process aided in creating an accurate and valid research study. The key method to ensure external validity was through the development of detailed case studies that will allow other researchers to replicate the process and potentially transfer the results (Creswell, 2009, p. 200).
Data Analysis

Qualitative data analysis is an iterative process that occurs throughout the data collection process according to Creswell (Creswell, 2009). The case study process involves a “detailed description of the setting or individuals” (Creswell, 2009, p. 184), and this study yielded a detailed picture of students and their decision making process within the particular educational context of the Franklin Park Public Schools. Several themes emerged that supported previous literature. Six student interviews and record reviews were conducted. Three at-risk students who graduated from Franklin Park High School were interviewed, and three at-risk students who dropped out of Franklin Park High School were also interviewed. Due to the size of the sample in this qualitative study some factors or trends presented in the literature did not emerge.

One potential pitfall of the case study methodology and qualitative research in general is the potential to lose focus and create a document that is rambling and endless (Yin, 1981). It is important to focus on the research questions, the theoretical lens, and the intellectual and practical goals (Yin, 1981). The concept of pull-out and push-out factors should emerge through discussions with the at-risk student participants and the focus groups with school personnel. The theoretical lenses of goal theory and organizational theory can also provide many possibilities to organize and interpret the data. It was valuable to understand what the goals of the at-risk students were when they were involved in the decision making process and what the students’ current goals are; if there is a difference between the students who graduated compared to those who dropped out; and if there is any difference in this small sample between the goals and how students valued education. Organizational theory can also lend important contextual information. Insight into how school structures, personnel, culture, programs, and norms impact student retention and attrition is critical. This research involved several stakeholder groups that
include students, teachers, counselors, and administrators to gain a broader and more in-depth understanding of the phenomenon within the context of the Franklin Park Public Schools. Inter-stakeholder and intra stakeholder themes emerged through this process, and the exploration of both is important for analysis and interpretation.

**Validity and Credibility**

Validity and credibility increase through a complete examination of researcher bias, rigorous data collection and analysis, a thorough examination of competing explanations and discrepant data, checking with participants on the researchers interpretation of the data, and carefully exploring the impact of the potential conflict between the researcher’s professional role and the impact that role may have on participant responses. Flyvbjerg (2006) outlined five common misunderstandings of the case study methodology,

this includes (a) theoretical knowledge is more valuable than practical knowledge; (b) one cannot generalize from a single case, therefore, the single-case study cannot contribute to scientific development; (c) the case study is most useful for generating hypotheses, whereas other methods are more suitable for hypotheses testing and theory building; (d) the case study contains a bias toward verification; and (e) it is often difficult to summarize specific case studies (p. 219).

These issues can be addressed through understanding the importance of the context-dependent data that the case study method elicits; careful selection of cases and participants that increases the researcher’s ability to answer research questions and allows for reasonable generalizations and conclusions; the past use of the case study method to test hypotheses; bias is inherent in all research and analysis and a clear understanding of this bias can help researchers overcome this
issue; and the case study method creates a narrative that can provide intimate details in a way that quantitative research cannot (Flyvbjerg, 2006).

Case study internal validity can be increased in three ways that include a clear research framework, pattern matching, and theory triangulation (Gibbert, Ruigrok, & Wicki, 2008). The clear research framework requires looking at a clear problem and examining the cause and effect relationships. The clear research framework studied is the decisions of at-risk students to either remain in school or drop out. Pattern matching can be identified by trends in the literature and how the participants in the case study converge or diverge from those identified trends. Theory triangulation occurs through the process of looking at multiple of perspectives. This study addresses this issue through interview and records reviews of multiple participants, interviews with school personnel, and a review of school related data.

The goal of achieving representativeness and typicality must be balanced with the practical process of purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling allows the researcher to select participants that will further the study and provide answers to the research questions (Creswell, 2009, p. 178). Due to the low number of potential subjects, purposeful sampling may limit the ability of the research to provide a true representative sample. The two groups of at-risk students that will be studied offer many opportunities for comparison. This proposal plans to draw from students who either graduated or dropped out of Franklin Park High School within the last five years. At-risk students who graduated would have overcome academic, attendance, or disciplinary issues. Drop-outs are defined as students who failed to complete high school and earned either a GED or entered the workforce or military after leaving Franklin Park High School. The researcher conducted a series of interviews with participants and reviewed their school records. An advantage of the researcher serving as an administrator in the district
provides the researcher with direct access to school personnel and families that could help to identify and track down potential subjects.

**Limitations of the Study**

This study is a qualitative study drawing from a small sample of students and it may be difficult to generalize findings broadly or across different populations that may represent different or more diverse populations. The focus of qualitative research is particularity rather than generalizability (Cresswell, 2009, p. 193). This creates an inherent limitation based on the qualitative methodology. This study provides direct insight into the specific setting of Franklin Park High School and the experiences of six at-risk students and the faculty working in the community. The study only draws students from a limited number of graduation year cohorts and from a small community that limits the sample based on the small number of students that dropped out of school during this period. Stringer addresses some of the limitations inherent in qualitative research, “Human inquiry, like any other human activity is both complex and always incomplete.” (Stringer, 2007, p. 179) It is impossible to interview all appropriate subjects, explore all of the questions or directions that arise throughout the qualitative inquiry process, and accurately and objectively analyze all information (Stringer, p. 179). It may be difficult to generalize the findings from this study to all low incidence dropout communities. There may be factors or variables at play that are unique to Franklin Park High School that influence the findings or conclusions.

Additionally, qualitative research has two specific challenges to validity. These issues are researcher bias and the concepts of reactivity (Maxwell, 2005, pp. 108-109). Both of these issues are relevant to this study. Clearly researcher bias is a potential issue for any study, but the researcher serves as an administrator in the setting being studied and has relationships with many
of the school personnel that took part in this study and many families who have relationships with potential current or prior at-risk students. This could impact how and what participants share with the researcher and even who participates in the study. The researchers position also potentially impacts how subjects may react or respond to questions during either interviews or focus groups.

**Protection of Human Subjects**

The researcher’s first priority is ensuring that human subjects are protected throughout the research process. This protection must occur during all phases of the research process from site selection through data analysis and interpretation. A case study requires participants to volunteer information about their experiences and perspectives on the phenomenon being studied by the researcher. It is critical that the researcher maintains the participants’ anonymity and protects them at every phase of the project. This is the one non-negotiable aspect of completing research using human subjects.

Throughout this research project the researcher worked to ensure that the participants in this study were protected from any harm as a result of participating in the research process. Ethical issues can arise during any part of the research process including the design of the research problem, development of the purpose and questions, during data analysis and interpretation, and throughout the writing and dissemination process (Creswell, 2009, pp. 87-92). The participants need to be clear on the purpose of the research and sign an informed consent form that “acknowledges that participants’ rights will be protected during data collection.” (Creswell, 2009, pp. 88-89) Research site “gatekeepers” need to be informed of the research and agree to the process in order to gain access to participants (Creswell, 2009, p. 90). The research site needs to be respected and left “undisturbed” after the research is completed (Creswell, 2009, p. 90). During the data analysis and interpretation phase of the project key ethical considerations
include maintaining the anonymity of participants through the use of aliases, development of a plan to keep and dispose of records, develop a plan to define ownership of the study, and a process to ensure the validity and accuracy of the research (Creswell, 2009, pp. 91-92). Several issues arise during the writing and dissemination process that can be addressed by eliminating biased language, a commitment to avoid fraudulent practices, a plan to present the finding to the site prior to publication, and releasing a detailed dissemination of the research process (Creswell, 2009, p. 92).

**Conclusion**

Understanding what factors impact an at-risk student’s decision to drop out or remain in school in a setting that has a relatively high graduation rate can provide valuable information for practitioners and researchers who are wrestling with this issue. The drop out issue impacts individuals, families, and communities across the United States. The decision to drop out has real consequences for the individual and society. These decisions evolve over time and do not occur in a vacuum. Personal, family, school, and community factors all impact a student’s decision to drop out or persevere and graduate. The process questions that this study proposes to address are best addressed through a qualitative case study method. The theoretical lenses of goal theory and organizational theory provide an effective way to view the individual within their context. This study examines the impact of both school related and external factors on a student’s decision to drop out or remain in school in a setting with a relatively low dropout rate and a number of interventions in place to support student retention and graduation. The perspectives of the students and the educators that work with them could provide insights into what factors are the most important in staying or leaving school and what supports and interventions were most influential for those students who persevered and graduated.
Chapter IV: Research Findings

Introduction

The setting for this study is notable because a great deal of research on the drop out phenomenon has been completed in schools and communities that have a high percentage of students that are at-risk of dropping out of school. Franklin Park High School has a low percentage of students who drop out of high school and the school’s drop out data nearly mirrors state averages. The goal is to examine why at-risk students in a setting with a low dropout rate choose to either drop out of school or persevere and complete all of the requirements for graduation.

A description of the research setting is important because it provides background on the community, what graduates engage in after high school, and the percentage of students who graduate from high school. This leads into a definition of risk factors and their impact on student attrition rates. This is followed by a presentation of the stories of the six at-risk students and the reasons why they chose to drop out or remain in school until graduation. These students discussed why they dropped out of school or graduated and what factors influenced their decision. Additionally, the students discussed their high school experiences, what they have been involved in since graduating from Franklin Park High School, and their plans for the future. Next, this section will explore why students choose to drop out of high school; this is followed by an examination of why students choose to remain in school. Finally, strategies to decrease the dropout rate are presented.

Context of the Study

Franklin Park High School is located in a suburb in northeastern Massachusetts. The population of the community is slightly higher than 30,000 residents (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). In 2012 nine hundred and nine students were
enrolled in the school, 95% of whom were White (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). The remaining 5% of the student population is a combination of African American, Asian, and Hispanic. During the 2011-2012 school year 13% of students were identified as low income compared to 35% in the state (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). The academic program is comprehensive and students have access to seven Advanced Placement Courses and a variety of courses through the virtual high school program. The virtual high school program allows students to choose from an extensive array of high school and Advanced Placement courses taught by instructors from schools around the world. Students are able to take the courses online during school and at home.

The high school offers a full complement of sports and extracurricular activities. The expectation for students is to attend college after high school graduation. Students’ post-graduate plans in 2011 included 55% of students attending four year private or public colleges, 31% attending two year colleges, 3% going to work, and 4% entering the military (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). In 2010 65% of students planned to attend four year colleges; this compared favorably to 60% of students in the state planning to attend four year colleges (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012).

The dropout rate at Franklin Park High School in 2010 was 2.9% which exactly mirrored the state dropout rate in Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). In 2011 the dropout rate at Franklin Park High School was 1.4% and the state dropout rate was 2.7% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). The overall four year graduation rates for Franklin Park High School during the 2009,
2010, 2011 school years are 90%, 89%, and 91% which are relatively high (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012).

General education students graduate at very high percentages. If you dig deeper into the numbers it is clear that the special education and low income subgroups perform significantly worse. Special education students four year graduation rates during that same time period were 73%, 68%, and 70% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Low income students’ graduation rates were also comparatively low at 59%, 65%, and 71% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Students who received special education services or students identified as low income were at a considerably greater risk of dropping out based on the data from the past three years.

One factor unique to the Franklin Park School system is the number of students who apply to the regional technical and trade school. Nearly one-third of each eighth grade class on average applies to the regional technical school. There is a huge demand for the programs offered at the technical school and students and families look at admission into the technical school as rigorous and valued. This impacts the number of students who enroll at Franklin Park High School because a very high percentage of students who are accepted into the technical school enroll. This also creates a small population of students who are disappointed that they were not accepted into the technical school and who had an interest in a trade and were not necessarily planning to attend college after high school. Many of these students are historically in the at-risk category, and there are limited programming options that prepare students for careers and not college directly after high school.
Defining Risk Factors

Risk factors paint a very clear picture and are an important lens to view the dropout phenomenon through. Students identified as receiving special education services or as living below the poverty line are less likely to graduate than students not identified in high need categories. The overall four year graduation rates for Franklin Park High School during the 2009, 2010, and 2011 school years are 90%, 89%, and 91% exceeds the state average for graduation rates for Massachusetts high schools (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). General education students graduate at very high percentages. As stated above, if you disaggregate the data into subgroups, it is clear that the special education and low income subgroups perform significantly worse compared to peers not falling into these high need subgroups. Special education students’ four year graduation rates during that same time period were 73%, 68%, and 70% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Low income students’ graduation rates were also comparatively low at 59%, 65%, and 71% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Students who fell into the high risk categories of students with special needs or low income fared much worse than their non-high risk counterparts. The population of English language learners was so low in Franklin Park that their impact on the graduation and dropout rates was not significant. The three year average graduation rate for all students was 90%, for students with special needs that rate drops to 71%, and for low income students that average drops even further to 65%.

Fortunately for the Franklin Park High School community there are a lower percentage of families and students identified as low income and struggling with poverty than across the state of Massachusetts. This is one clear factor that differentiates many suburban communities from
an urban community. The free and reduced lunch rate in Franklin Park was 13% during the 2012 school year compared to 35% for the state of Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Additionally, Franklin Park has a relatively low percentage of students who have limited English or speak no English. Franklin Park has 1.5% of students who are non-native English speakers or limited English proficient compared to 24% across the state of Massachusetts (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Compare these numbers to a few of the urban school systems in Massachusetts and the difference is striking. Boston has a free and reduced lunch population of 70% and a non-native English speaker population of 45% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Lowell has a free and reduced lunch population of 75% and a non-native English speaker population of 41% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Springfield has a free and reduced lunch population of 85% and a non-native English speaker population of 25% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). The graduation rates in 2011 for Boston were 69%, Lowell 75%, and Springfield 54% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). These numbers are comparable to Franklin Park’s low income and special education graduation numbers.

The Franklin Park population has a much lower poverty rate than its urban counterparts and higher graduation rate, but compare the graduation rates of the high risk student populations in Franklin Park and the system is not faring much better than its urban counterparts. These numbers were worse than Lowell, comparable to Boston, and better than Springfield. Despite some of the advantages of a suburban community, high risk students are still struggling at similar levels to their urban counterparts. This provides another strong argument of the impact of
poverty on student achievement and graduation rates. Suburban schools, in some ways, may be less prepared to meet the needs of students who struggle with poverty than their urban or rural counterparts. Nearly eighty-eight percent of students in the Franklin Park Schools are not struggling with poverty, but the twelve percent of students who are struggling with poverty are also struggling to graduate. It may be very important for the school system to target students who are identified as low income and provide additional support even before they enter high school as this population is graduating at a much lower rate than the Franklin Park population as a whole. It is clear that high risk populations struggle in all settings whether they are suburban, rural, or urban. In suburban communities targeted interventions focused on these high need populations may have some positive impact on student retention and attrition rates.

The Stories of Six At-Risk Students

This study is framed by six at-risk students who recently attended Franklin Park High School and their reasons for staying in or leaving school. Three students chose to drop out of high school before graduation, and three students met all of the requirements of a high school diploma and graduated. Each student either dropped out or graduated within the last five years. The students discuss their high school experiences, what factors impacted their decision to stay in school and graduate or drop-out, and what they are currently doing with their lives and planning to do in the future. The students’ experiences had several clear common elements, but each of their stories and experiences are also unique to them.

Shane. Shane is nineteen years old. He is a recent graduate of Franklin Park High School. During his high school career, Shane struggled with attendance, behavioral issues, and academically in his classes. Shane graduated from high school as part of the class of 2012. Shane received special education services and was enrolled in a number of classes that provided
instruction in a small group setting. He began high school in the fall of 2007 and graduated in five years. During his freshman year, he earned fifteen out of forty possible credits. He failed to earn credits in more than half of his classes. He received an “F” in Algebra 1A, Biology B, and Photography. This means that his numerical average in the course was less than fifty. Additionally, he received an “E” in Biology A and an incomplete in World History. Students who earn a grade of between fifty and sixty-four are eligible to re-take courses for credit as part of the New Start Program or summer school. Students who earn a grade of less than fifty are unable to make-up the course and must re-take the course for credit during the regular school year. Shane earned credits in Wellness (a combination of health and physical education), English, and Math. The English and Math classes were in a small group setting and provided Shane with additional support and were taught by a special education teacher. He felt that the classes he took in the small group setting were better suited to meet his learning needs. Shane enrolled in Summer School and was able to earn credits in Biology. Shane was suspended multiple times during his freshman year for theft, insubordination, inappropriate language, and verbal abuse of a teacher. Shane often became frustrated and would swear at a teacher or refuse to do work. He stated, “I didn’t care what anyone told me when I was a freshman. If I didn’t like them I would tell the teacher or anyone exactly what I thought.”

During his sophomore year, Shane followed a similar pattern earning only half of his potential credits. He received credits in Instructional Support, AI History, and AI Math in both semesters. These courses were all taught by special education teachers and were in a small group setting. He received an incomplete or an “F” in both semesters of World Studies, MCAS Biology, and Physical Science. These were all inclusion classes taught by a general education teacher. Shane was significantly more successful in small group classes and struggled in a larger
setting without the support small group classes provided. Again, he also struggled with
attendance and disciplinary issues. Shane was verbally abusive to a staff member on multiple
occasions, smoking in the bathroom, swearing, use of cell phone in class, and leaving the
building without permission. Shane continued to struggle with authority and frequently swore at
teachers if he became frustrated or angry. His teachers tried to work with him, but Shane was
often unwilling to accept their help.

During the 2009-2010 school year, Shane only earned ten credits out of forty. The only
courses he earned credit in were an English class and a Science class that was delivered in a
small group setting by a special educator. He failed to earn credits in other courses that were
taught in a small group setting and all of the large group inclusion classes he enrolled in. His
struggles with disciplinary issues continued with six suspensions. Attendance also continued to
be a challenge as well.

Shane began to turn things around during the 2010-2011 school year. He earned credits
in all of his courses. His attendance and behavior improved. Shane received additional support
from the alternate classroom. In this setting he was able to take a number of classes within the
program where he received additional behavioral support, counseling, and academic support.
Again during the 2011-2012 Shane earned credits in all of his courses. During the interview
Shane discussed his struggles and how he improved and was able to earn enough credits to
graduate. During his five year high school career Shane was absent one hundred and eighty
days, tardy eighty days, and dismissed eighty-five times. This was the equivalent of missing a
complete school year not counting the time he missed for arriving late or leaving school early.

Shane talked about his high school experience:
Every school year was the same; you either did the work or you didn’t. Whether or not I liked a class depends on the teacher. The atmosphere mattered; some teachers were respectful and laid back and other teachers felt that they had more power than the principal.

Shane emphasized that if he liked the teacher or developed a positive relationship with the teacher he was more likely to be successful. Shane clearly understood how his own effort mattered and when he put an effort in he was more successful. He stated:

I graduated because I ended up doing the work. I stayed home for a big part of two years and was bored. It is kind of like now. I do not have my license and right now I can’t get a ride anywhere. When I do find my car I already have my diploma. Without the diploma it would really be hard.

Shane sees his diploma as important to him finding work in the future. Shane admitted that he received a lot of assistance on his road to graduation. He stated:

The assistant principal put me on a program to graduate. I took classes through New Start. There were a stack of folders that I went through. The guidance counselors helped me. Mr. Gifford’s class was very helpful. My family did not really help, but people in my family would tell me what they thought about the situation. My guidance counselor was helpful. She added my absences each semester, told me what I needed for each of classes, and helped me after school. Mr. Gifford helped me as a teacher even for the classes he didn’t teach. My two assistant principals also helped me. The principal helped me a lot. I would go to the principal’s office and she would give me something to eat and place to get my work done.
Shane’s relationship with school administrators allowed them to provide additional support to him. He also received a significant amount of assistance from his guidance counselor who often advocated on his behalf with teachers, helped set his schedule, and provided homework and classwork help.

Shane discussed his difficulties attending school throughout his high school career:

If I were to help out other students I would allow students to have more absences. Some people are sick a lot and it is hard to be out only twelve days. I did not come to school a lot for two years. When I didn’t come to school I slept, worked some, and would hang out with my friends. Many of my friends dropped out.

His peer group struggled with attendance, academics, and alcohol and substance abuse. He lamented that many of his friends did not graduate and were not involved in many positive things. Shane was able to quickly list his friends who graduated, but he had a much longer list of his friends that did not graduate.

Shane discussed what he was currently involved in and his future plans:

Since graduation I am mostly hanging out at home. I do not have a job. A typical day is I eat and work out at my house. My friends are trying to get me to go to college. I want to get a job as a security guard at night. I may look at trade school. I graduated because I know I needed the diploma for the future.

Shane was proud of his accomplishment of meeting his goal of graduation, but was disappointed that he did not have a job or a license. He looked forward to getting a job and a car.

**Sharon.** Sharon was scheduled to graduate as part of the class of 2010. She ended up dropping out during her senior year. Throughout her academic career, Sharon had difficulty passing her classes. When asked about this she stated, “The classes weren’t hard. I just didn’t
care. I wasn’t into school; I was more interested in other things.” In her freshmen year she failed two courses, algebra and biology. During her sophomore year she failed Spanish 2 and world studies (a social studies class). Sharon failed her second attempt at Spanish 2 during her junior year. She failed to earn any credits during her senior year. Sharon was suspended five times during her high school career. She was suspended twice for fighting and once each for truancy, leaving school, and insubordination. Attendance was also a significant issue. Sharon was absent one hundred and thirty-one times during her high school career, tardy from school seventy times, and dismissed twenty-five times.

Sharon discussed her high school experience:

My best year was my freshman year. High school was not that good of an experience for me. I had too much of an attitude. I did not like the rule about cell phones. I did not want to go to class. Other students impacted me leaving school because I was in an abusive relationship.

Sharon was very social in high school and did not see her classes as a priority. Although Sharon was suspended five times during her high school career, she admitted that she could have been suspended from school significantly more for skipping school and skipping class. Sharon said, “A lot of times I didn’t feel like going into school because I wanted to do other things like hang out with friends or sleep in.” She felt that she needed to remove herself from an abusive relationship with a male student who also attended Franklin Park High School. This is one of the key factors of why she left school before graduating.

Sharon continued:

I dropped out during my senior year because I had too many absences. I did not want to go to school. I hated school and the people that went to school. I dropped out as soon as
I turned eighteen. I did earn my GED one month after I dropped out. Earning the GED was easy for me.

Clearly Sharon had the ability to complete high school based on how quickly she completed her requirements for the GED and her performance in a number of classes. It is interesting that she focused on peers as a key reason that she dropped out of high school. A number of school personnel attempted to prevent Sharon from dropping out, “An English teacher tried to stop me from dropping out. The guidance office also tried to stop me from dropping out; they tried to make me feel better about school, but I was set on what I was going to do.” Once Sharon reached her eighteenth birthday she was able to sign herself out of school according to Massachusetts state law. As soon as Sharon turned eighteen she signed herself out of school and enrolled in a GED program.

Sharon felt that there were a number of factors that contributed to her not wanting to go to school or seeing receiving her high school diploma as a clear or important goal. Sharon stated:

The bathrooms in the school were terrible. There was a social studies teacher that I hated; he was always on my case about my cell phone or being late to class. I also hated one of the assistant principals; she always ruined my plans when I tried to leave school. I hated gym class because of the mile run and dodge ball. The work itself was easy, but I was never there. The work was not hard, but I wasn’t there to do it. I was in line with the credits to graduate, but I left during my senior year anyway.

Sharon was a capable student and found the academic requirements manageable. Other factors impacted her decision to drop out that included social issues she was facing and a lack of feeling...
connected to the school community. Several times during the interview Sharon discussed the impact of a romantic relationship on her decision to leave school. Sharon stated:

I was a cheer leader during my freshman and sophomore year, but my boyfriend did not want me doing it so I quit. I started hanging out with a bad group. I don’t talk to any the people in that group anymore. If I could change anything I would not have been in a relationship. I would have thought about the future more with high school. I would not have dropped out. I would have not gotten suspended. I would have tried to do my best.

Sharon pointed to how she was connected to a positive school activity and how her social relationships with a “bad group” contributed to her de-prioritizing school and not attending. She took ownership for her choices, but she was able to clearly articulate how her selection of a social group who was involved in a number of negative activities impacted her school success.

Sharon had a difficult time complying with the rules of the school and her closest friend also dropped out of school. Sharon stated:

My best friend dropped out. She was a grade ahead of me. My boyfriend was abusive. When I left school I would hang out with my friends and party. I probably had fifty or more absences during my senior year. I filed an absence appeal form every year. I probably missed more than two hundred days of school during my high school career. Only a very small percentage of the time was I actually sick. I left with my best friend; we would hang out, go shopping, or do whatever. I had a very strained relationship with my mother during high school.

Sharon placed socializing with her best friend above going to school. She also discussed challenges at home with her relationship with her mother. She has since repaired that relationship and currently lives with her mother. Sharon considers her mother a key support and
appreciated her guidance throughout her high school career. It is interesting to note that she remains connected to her best friend who also dropped out of school despite her friend living in a different state.

Sharon also received support and encouragement from several members of the high school faculty. Sharon stated:

There were a number of teachers who were supportive of me in high school. The school librarian always made me feel good about myself. She never wanted to see me fail. She would always ask me how I was doing and how my other classes were going.

Sharon discussed her connections with several concerned adults in the building. Although the research consistently emphasizes the importance of a concerned adult in the life of an at-risk student; these connections did not keep her in school.

Sharon is still trying to figure out what to do and how to approach her future. Sharon discussed this, “Currently I work ten hours per week. I am interested in going back to school to be a dental hygienist. I want to have fun right now. I spent one semester at a community college.” She was happy with her current job and current relationship, but she was aware that she needed to find full time employment and had an interest in furthering her education. Sharon was optimistic for the future and felt that she would find full time work and enroll in school.

Allison. Allison is eighteen years old and dropped out of Franklin Park High School during her junior year in 2011. Allison has a passion for music and plays the piano, drums, clarinet, sings, and play the bass. She was able to take a couple of music courses during her high school experience. Academics were not a struggle for Allison, but she did not feel particularly challenged or engaged, “High school was not what I expected. I expected it to be fun. I felt like I was not learning anything new and I re-learned everything from 7th and 8th grade.” Allison
earned all of her credits during her freshman year, but did not earn credits in two classes during her sophomore year. She failed Algebra 2 and passed World Studies but did not earn credits because of her attendance. Allison clearly had academic ability as she scored in the advanced category in both the English and Mathematics on the state MCAS tests that were administered during her sophomore year. During eleventh grade Allison only earned credit in two classes and dropped out of school. Allison described her high school academic experience:

Academically I was bored. I am sure that I could have done better; I already read most of the books that were assigned. It was hard to stay focused; I was doing well until I failed geometry. I did not get that class at all. I did not like the math teacher; I felt like she didn’t teach. The teacher marked my answers wrong because my journey to the answer was incorrect. After failing that class it really threw me off. My plan was that I would drop-out of high school, get my GED, and then start college. Another reason that contributed to my decision was that I did not get credit for gym classes. I had a medical condition that prevented me from fully participating in gym class and created a plan with the gym teacher where I would work out with weights or walk on the track outside. I found out later that the gym teacher never gave me credit for this and I only received zero’s for the gym classes. This would cause me to stay in high school for an extra semester, and that was not going to work.

It is interesting to note that Allison did not find the work challenging but did not like the math teacher. Her scores on the MCAS indicate that she was able to complete the work.

Allison discussed her lack of connections in high school to her peers and the social scene: The social aspect wasn’t fun either. I felt like I was growing apart from the people that I used to hang around with. My friends were getting into drugs, alcohol, and partying. I
felt really left out and even though I didn’t drink or use drugs it would have been nice to be invited to some of the parties. She was not feeling connected to her peers or the party culture many of her former friends were involved in. She discussed how school was not engaging, she was feeling socially isolated, and did not make any significant connections to faculty. Allison stated:

I was not being challenged in high school. I was lonely and was not making many connections with students in school or even outside of school. I did not feel like the staff tried very hard to convince me to stay. During my meeting with my guidance counselor, the counselor asked me twice if I was sure that I knew what I was doing. Teachers thought I was capable of being successful without a high school diploma. Richard Branson dropped out of high school at fifteen and owned his own island by twenty-two. Allison’s parents had mixed emotions, “My mother was devastated when I told her I was dropping out. She wanted me to attend prom and to see me graduate. My father was understanding and supportive.” The school did not engage her or reach out to her in ways that she felt were meaningful or “real”.

Allison felt little connection to the students, staff, academic programs, or extracurricular activities. She stated:

I was bored, school didn’t challenge me, and I was making no connections. I wanted to go back to a nearby city where I grew up. I moved to Franklin Park when I was in second grade. I hung out with an older girl; her name was Jessie. We were inseparable until she went to high school and started hanging out with a different group of people. These new friends of hers were into different things that I was not into and did not want to be a part of. So I stopped hanging out with her and said goodbye to my best friend.
Everyone told me not to drop out of school both outside and inside of school. My parents wanted me to graduate, but eventually supported my decision. Allison felt that adults and peers were not effectively reaching out to her, but she also states that everyone told her not to drop out. Allison did discuss some positive connections that she made with Franklin Park High School faculty members:

The school librarian was one of my favorite people in the school system. She always listened to me and supported me. The history teacher was a nice guy and always gave me great advice. My Latin teacher built a love of languages in me and pushed me to learn new languages. My 6th grade math teacher was very positive and I had a great year that year in school. 4th grade was also a good year for me.

Although Allison presented some conflicting statements in her interview, she clearly was not feeling challenged or engaged by the high school environment or culture.

Allison had several suggestions to make the school experience more engaging and accessible. She stated:

It might help students if afterschool activities are more accessible and affordable. I could not afford to participate in many of the after school activities offered at the high school. I would change the block schedule to a more traditional schedule. This contributed to my boredom and the classes seemed so long. Sometimes we would just sit there or there would be 84 minutes of silence or we would talk about nothing.

It is interesting to note that some faculty members also mentioned the block schedule as something that some at-risk students struggled with. Fees are also waived for students who are from low-income families, but Allison was either unaware or unable to take advantage of that process or program.
Allison earned her GED quickly after dropping out of high school. This is not surprising based on her previous academic performance and standardized test scores. Currently she is unemployed. Allison stated:

Right now I’m not doing anything any productive. I enrolled in the local community college, but due to a car accident I had to stop attending. I plan to go back to school. I did three of the things that I said I would do. Now I need to go back to school and finish. Earning the GED was easy for me; I received it before my class graduated from high school. I also know that I will finish my college degree.

Allison seemed committed to returning to school to complete a college degree. She also had several plans and dreams for the future, “My plan is to open up a sober bar in a nearby city. This would provide a night club environment for people who did not want to drink or were recovering addicts. This would provide people an opportunity to socialize without the temptation.” Allison discussed a positive relationship with her boyfriend and continued positive relationships with both of her parents.

Alana. Alana is twenty-one years old and relocated to the West Coast not too long after dropping out of Franklin Park High School. Alana dropped out during her junior year. She struggled with attendance throughout her high school career accumulating fifty-six absences, seventy tardies, and nine dismissals in less than three years. Discipline was also an issue. Alana was suspended eight times over her three years in high school for offenses such as skipping classes and truancy. She also experienced academic difficulties in her freshman year where she only passed five out of eight classes. She was able to earn five additional credits in summer school when she successfully earned credit for a biology class she failed. In her sophomore year Alana did not earn any credit for the eight courses she enrolled in. Again she did earn five
credits in summer school for a World Studies class. During her junior year she did not earn any credits either and decided to drop out.

Alana discussed her story:

I dropped out of school when I was sixteen. I got my GED one month after I dropped out. I enrolled at a local two year school to train to be a paralegal. I wanted to be an attorney; after a little while at the school I realized that I did not want to be an attorney. I switched from the private two year school to the local community college. I got a job as a paralegal and became a notary. I worked hard for about seven or eight months and I saved a lot of money. Then I booked a ticket for California and moved there. I did not work for the first three months; then I got a job at a legal marketing company. I worked there for a while until I was laid off last winter. I will start work again at the end of the month as a manager at a restaurant that my cousin is opening. The place is a high end pizza restaurant that serves a variety of Italian dishes and salads. Moving to California is the best thing I’ve ever done. Ultimately, I want to move to Hawaii and go to college there. They have a program where you can attend a semester at sea and take courses while you travel on a ship in the ocean.

Alana was unable to successfully attend high school, but had some professional success after high school and was able to complete some college courses and easily complete the requirements of the GED program she enrolled in.

Alana discussed the academic experiences after college and stated that the post-high school courses were not particularly challenging:

I completed one semester at the private two year college and one semester at the local community college after receiving my GED. I still needed to figure out what I wanted to
do. Right now I am very positive and happy. After high school I did a complete 180 and stopped hanging out with the people that I hung out with in high school and worked and studied.

Her peer group provided a distraction from school and a negative influence. Many of her friends were not particularly successful in school and were into the “party scene”. Alana acknowledged that the choices to hang out with these friends were clearly hers. Alana stated:

Whenever I think back to high school, I am embarrassed. When teachers would hand me a test, I would hand it back to them and tell them not to bother. I skipped school. I hung out with losers. I was immature and I was in with the wrong crowd. I was surrounded by bad people. I hung out with senior guys when I was a freshman. They were into bad things. I got mixed up into the wrong crowd and had a negative experience because of myself and my choices.

She discussed her poor attitude and her lack of interest in school as well. Alana was unable or unwilling to connect her experiences in school with her future. Alana then discussed why she chose to drop out of school:

I was a junior and had credits that made me a freshman. I would have needed to go to school for a fifth year. I was ready to get over the whole high school thing. I wanted to get a job, make money, and support myself. Dropping out of school was the best thing that I could have done; it helped me grow up. At sixteen, after I dropped out, I was working or going to school seven days a week. It helped me grow up; I wouldn’t recommend this for anyone else, but it was something I needed to do.

She recognized that she was not having a successful experience in high school and needed to make a change.
She had many connections to adults in the high school. A number of teachers, counselors, and administrators took an interest in her and tried to help her become more connected and engaged in high school. She felt that despite this support from the faculty that high school was simply not working for her. Alana said:

A lot of people helped me at the high school. The principal and assistant principal talked to me all of the time. They listened to me; I felt like I was always in the office. The reason people drop out, it’s all you. If you don’t want to do it, you are not going to do it. This is true in general and in life; if you don’t want to do something then you are not going to do it.

Her situation at home was significantly more chaotic. Alana discussed this:

During my freshman year it was World War III in my house when my parents were getting a divorce. It was a huge deal. My whole family lived on one street. My father lived in one house with my grandmother and my mother lived in another house on the street. There were cops, restraining orders; it was crazy. I got caught up in their divorce; there were no rules or consequences for me. I didn’t listen to anyone; I had no respect. I moved in with my father and he was not in a good place. I was with my grandmother and my aunt much of the time. I was 14 or 15 years old and was hanging out with 20 year olds. I would come home at 4 am. Luckily, I realized that this was not the road that I wanted to go down.

Alana was able to come and go as she pleased and there was no accountability at home for her school work, behavior, or attendance. Alana struggled in all three of these areas despite having the ability to be very successful.
Alana had a hard time seeing the value in school and failed to make it a priority in her life. She stated:

I was very disrespectful and rude to my teachers and other people at school. I had a positive relationship with the school administrators and some of my teachers. I felt there was no need for me to be at school. I was so far behind that it was pointless. My whole family thought I was a loser when I dropped out. People I knew always told me I could do it and that helped. Teachers and other adults in the school would always give me the impression that I could turn it around. That also helped. Dropping out of school and moving to California were two of the best things that I ever did.

Alana felt she needed to make a change because she was not experiencing success in school, was involved with a negative peer group who were contributing to and supporting her bad choices, and was faced with a challenging home life due to her parent’s divorce. Although Alana is currently unemployed, she was going to start full time work shortly and prepare for school and her move to Hawaii.

Patty. Patty transferred to Franklin Park High School after her freshman year where she attended school at another local Massachusetts high school. Patty was at-risk of dropping out of high school due to a number of factors that included attendance, behavior incidences, learning disabilities, and struggles with mental health issues. Patty was absent from school eighty-one times, tardy twenty-nine times, and dismissed from school twenty-seven times. Patty was suspended several times for violating school rules, bullying another student, smoking, and leaving the school without permission. Based on her attendance difficulties and behavioral incidences she enrolled in the high school alternative program and was able to benefit from the extra support.
Patty described her high school experience as a struggle. She highlighted the importance of relationships with faculty members to her eventual graduation. She stated:

High school was difficult, but I graduated. Several teachers helped me and the principals were great. I did not fit in. I went from going to a school where I knew everyone and then I transferred to a school where I didn’t know anyone. The school I was at originally was closer to Boston, but I was doing terribly there.

Patty discussed how the transition to the new school was difficult and how she had a hard time making friends and with social interactions in general. This contributed to several suspensions and social difficulties she experienced generally throughout her high school career. Patty felt more comfortable at her old school and often wanted to go back; her struggles in the classroom were similar in both schools.

Patty highlighted the importance of the alternative program to her earning her high school diploma. She stated:

I graduated because the alternative classroom teacher, Mr. Williams. He sat me down and told me that I could get through it. He helped me whenever I needed it. His class was the most helpful. I also participated in the New Start program. In my junior year I took four classes in the New Start Program (two each semester). The teachers worked with me and would not let me fail.

Mr. Williams supported Patty in all of her academic work and provided a supportive environment that contributed to her passing classes and earning credits toward graduation. The alternative program allowed Patty to complete more than half of her classes in a small setting with significant support.

Patty emphasized the importance of the adults in the high school. Patty said:
Many people helped me get through high school. My father worked at the school and was always encouraging me. I had a really rough time in high school and was hospitalized because I was suicidal.

Patty received significant support from the high school guidance office, special education department, and the high school administration. Patty stated, “Two social workers from the hospital followed me after I was discharged and supported me as I returned to school. I graduated in four years.” Her parents also played a critical role, “My mother was also very supportive. She pushed me to succeed, helped me get up and actually go to school, and provided consequences if I did not go such as not letting me get my license.” Her father was in the building and helped her when she ran into difficulty at school by connecting to her to appropriate resources. A key figure whom she brought up repeatedly during the interview was Mr. Williams, the alternative classroom teacher. Patty stated:

Mr. Williams, the teacher in the alternative classroom, had a good heart and always made himself available for me and other students. Ms. Lincoln was also a great help. She pushed me to get out of high school and finish; she pushed me so hard. The assistant principal would help me work through my problems and always believed that I could do it. The guidance counselors also helped me; they got me through everything.

Patty clearly acknowledged the support she received from adults in the high school and how they were critical to her finishing high school and graduating.

Patty discussed her experiences after graduation:

I live in New Hampshire now with my boyfriend. After high school I enrolled in beauty school, but dropped out because I was allergic to a number of the products. Currently I work at a retail coffee shop and bakery. I plan to go back to school.
Patty was employed part-time and was hoping for more hours and to eventually return to school to train for a career. Patty focused on the help she received from others to earn her diploma.

**Sonny.** Sonny graduated in 2011 after four years of high school. His overall grade point average was 2.74 and he received special education services throughout his high school career. Sonny took eight classes in a small group setting. He felt those classes were helpful, “The smaller classes worked for me. There were fewer distractions and the teacher could spend more time explaining things.” Sonny was suspended several times during his high school career for fighting, smoking, leaving the school building without permission, and insubordination. Sonny was frequently in the office for conflicts with other students. Over the course of his high school career, Sonny was absent forty-six times, tardy ten times, and dismissed ten times. His family was identified as low income and he received free lunch. Sonny admitted struggling with his classes throughout high school and with relationships with peers. Sonny said:

> I often got into fights with other kids. They picked on me a lot. I didn’t like it. The first two years of high school were really tough. It got better after that, but the first two years were tough.

Sonny discussed his high school experience:

> High school was alright. My freshman and sophomore years were the worst. My junior and senior years were much better. When I started high school kids were picking on me. I ended up graduating because I wanted that diploma. I did not want to be a dropout. I wanted to be proud of myself. I stuck through it and I did it on my own. I did it on my own, but I received help from a couple of my friends.

Not only did Sonny receive help from his friends, but he also acknowledged that he received help from the Franklin Park High School faculty. Sonny discussed this as well:
The guidance counselors also helped me out. Mr. Bryan, one of my guidance counselors, always worked with me. The assistant principal also helped me when I was having a difficult time. The gym teacher also helped me and listened to me. Stick through high school and do your work; it’s all on you.

Sonny clearly saw high school graduation as a goal and worked to meet that goal.

Sonny recognized the importance of working hard and perseverance, “You need to do it all on your own.” There were a number of times that he was failing or classes or having a difficult time with peers, but he was always able to work through the issue or access resources or adults in the building. Sonny spent a lot of time with the school administrators who provided him with advice and often mediated disputes that he had with other students. The guidance office closely tracked Sonny’s progress and worked directly with the special education department to ensure that Sonny continued on the right track. Sonny talked about his time in the main office, “I was in the office all the time. The assistant principals helped me. I didn’t always agree with how they handled things, but they helped me.”

Sonny is currently looking for a job. He had a job at a donut and coffee fast food restaurant for about five months, but he quit and “messed that up”. Sonny wants to work at a grocery store, but is looking for anything. He articulated his plan during the interview, “I am in the process of getting my license, and once I can drive it will help me find a job and get to my job. I would like to go to college and get a job.” Sonny admitted to struggling after graduation, but he remained positive about his future.

Why students choose to drop out

Students chose to drop out a Franklin Park High School for a number of reasons. Each of the at-risk students was able to articulate a number of factors that influenced their decision to
drop out of school. Faculty members were also able to describe multiple factors that influence a student to leave school prior to graduation. These factors include the lack of success in the freshman year, organizational factors inherent to Franklin Park High School, curriculum, school rules and expectations, attendance, student retention in prior grades, suspensions, economic factors, home support, peer relationships, drugs and alcohol, lack of school success throughout a student’s school history, mental health issues, unrealistic future expectations, negative relationships with faculty members, and lack of connections to the school community. These factors are both internal and external to the school setting and many of the factors are interrelated. This section presents the themes that emerged from the students’ voices first and presents the views of the faculty from the Franklin Park Public Schools.

Lack of success during their freshman year. Lack of success in the freshman year can lead a student to struggle and increase their risk of not completing high school. All six at-risk students faced some struggles during their freshmen years. Shane, Sonny, and Patty were able to recover and earn enough credits to graduate. Unfortunately, Alana, Allison, and Sharon were unable to recover from slow academic starts in high school and dropped out. Starting strong in high school and earning credits is very important. This is the first experience many students have of working toward a goal incrementally through accumulating course credits. Students need to earn 140 credits toward graduation at Franklin Park High School. This means that over a four year high school career students can only fail to earn credits in four courses and remain on track to graduate. The academic expectations and the work load increase from a student’s experience in middle school. Although there are several opportunities to recover credits; students who struggle in school can also have difficulty balancing a full academic schedule and effectively engage in a credit recovery program.
Teachers, administrators, and counselors focused on the importance of the freshman year as an indicator of future success in high school or a warning of a student being at-risk of dropping out of school. Students who struggle and fail courses or do not meet minimum attendance requirements “end in a hole” after their freshman or sophomore year and do not see graduation as a realistic option. Some students “start slipping early and then it just snowballs”, and these students have a difficult time digging themselves out of a hole and recovering.

Students who do not have a positive experience in high school have a difficult time reconciling the requirement of additional school experiences to meet graduation requirements through the New Start program, summer school, or staying an extra semester or an extra year. This can be very discouraging for a student who is looking at the possibility of dropping out. Freshman year success or failure can be a good predictor of future student success or graduation. Students who fail courses during their freshman year are at a greater risk for dropping out of school.

**Organizational factors.** School structures, culture, or characteristics can impact at-risk student’s decision making processes. There are a number of factors that teachers cited that were characteristics of Franklin Park High School that could negatively impact some at-risk students’ decision making processes. The schedule was cited by both students and the faculty as a potential factor. Two of the at-risk students discussed how the schedule impacted their engagement and performance. Sharon had a hard time engaging in school and often described herself as uninterested or bored. Sonny liked taking fewer classes and felt the semester schedule offered him a fresh start half way through the year. One counselor identified that the eighty-four minute blocks can be difficult for some students. She shared that students often described the blocks as “long” or “boring”. Franklin Park High School employs a four by four block schedule where students enroll in four courses each semester. Students take fewer courses each semester,
but the time for each class is 84 minutes which can be challenging for some students to maintain attention and focus. Other faculty members stated that this could also be a benefit because students can focus their efforts on fewer courses compared to more traditional six or seven period full year class schedules. Four courses can require less organization and more focused homework and studying. The Franklin Park School Committee has requested several examinations of the school schedule over the past five years, but after several reviews the community has decided that the block schedule has more positives than negatives for student learning, achievement, and retention.

Organizational factors that are inherent in Franklin Park High School can either positively or negatively impact an at-risk student to either graduate or leave school early. Schools and school cultures can impact how a student connects and engages to the school environment. All of the at-risk students interviewed for this project alluded to social concerns or issues. Sharon specifically described an abusive relationship with a boyfriend that pushed her out of activities and eventually contributed to her decision to leave school. These internal or organizational factors can either engage students in the classes and extracurricular activities of the school or it can push students away and move them to focus on other priorities. The school culture at Franklin Park High School is focused on college preparation which is an expectation that most families have for their students within the district. One key internal factor is the school culture and the ability of the school to foster connections between students, faculty, and school groups. Both the faculty and students interviewed for this study also discussed the positive connections between faculty and students. This is even true for the three students who decided to drop out of school. One faculty member discussed the value of connections in more depth:
Students who struggle to fit in socially can be more likely to drop out of school. Students who are involved in some activity or group are more likely to graduate. A person a student forms a connection with can increase the likelihood of students being successful in courses and coming to school. It is clear from the literature that connections are important. A connection with at least one person in the building correlates to a greater chance of graduating. Making connections and building relationships are critically important.

Another faculty member discussed the importance of peer connections and peer groups, “If the friends of a student drop out then the student is more likely to drop out”. This shows the importance of both positive and negative peer influences. All of the students interviewed for this study discussed this in their interviews as well. Each student could point to several friends who either dropped out of school or were struggling with issues that were pulling them from the school environment.

The school culture can have a significant impact on at-risk students’ attitudes toward school. Allison was not interested in sports and was not engaged or connected to the school culture, and this contributed to her eventual decision to drop out of school. One teacher commented that:

Although sports engage a large percentage of students in a positive way, there are a number of students that do not see sports as interesting or something that they would want to participate in. Some students can be turned off by the focus on sports and the attention athletes get.

All three focus groups agreed that sports can engage students and often leads to more positive academic performance, but it is clear that sports do not appeal to everyone.
The focus on college may not meet all students’ needs. Both Sonny and Shane expressed an interest in learning a trade or having more of a focus on job preparation during their high school experience. It is hard to argue that a focus on college readiness is negative, but some students may benefit from expanded programming in vocational or career focused areas. All six of the at-risk students are struggling with employment since graduating from Franklin Park High School. Another teacher also discussed how the college-focused culture of the school, academic schedule, and the guidance office may not be the best way to reach all students. The teacher stated:

A focus on college is positive and important…..but we do not have many options for students who are not interested in attending either a two year or a four year college.

Students would benefit from more choices that are vocationally based or a more robust internship program that follows more of an apprentice model.

This focus on college readiness is a clear trend in public high school education in Massachusetts, but this trend may in fact leave some students behind and disconnected from their high school experience.

**Curriculum.** The curriculum is irrelevant for some students. The high school programs and curriculum are designed for college bound students. Shane, Sonny, and Patty all discussed how they were not interested in attending college and would have benefited from some type of vocational training. The importance of the curriculum issue cannot be understated. Students entering the high school from eighth grade have an option to attend either the local public high school or the regional technical school. Approximately one hundred students from the eighth grade class are accepted to the regional technical high school. This can account for as much as one third of an eighth grade class. This is also one of the factors that contributed to making
Franklin Park High School a unique setting. Very few communities across Massachusetts have such a high application and enrollment rate in technical high schools. The technical high school does not accept many truly at-risk students who have had attendance, behavioral, or significant academic issues. This can place these students at additional risk when they attend Franklin Park High School because the school is geared toward the college bound student. Nearly 15% of the student population over the past few years indicated that they did not plan to attend college (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Some of these students may have benefited from technical or vocational training where currently there are limited options in the public school setting. This lack of connection to the curriculum and perception that what is being taught is not relevant to their future plans can cause disengagement, boredom, and lead to behaviors that can contribute to a lack of school success. There are limited options for students who are not interested in pursuing a college degree and who are not able to gain admittance into the regional technical high school.

**School rules and expectations.** All of the students interviewed for this study struggled on some level with following and conforming to school rules and expectations. Each student interviewed was suspended at least one time and most of the students were suspended multiple times. The issues ranged from insubordination to skipping school or leaving the building without permission. There are probably a number of variables at play here including a lack of connection or engagement to the school community, negative peer influences or relationships, a need for any type of attention, or a lack of seeing real value in conforming to the expected school behaviors. All of the students admitted to maturing over the course of their high school career and mostly making better choices as they got older.
This was confirmed by suspension statistics for each student; as students moved into their junior and senior year they were suspended less frequently. This was true of the students who dropped out and graduated. Alana talked about her attitude and behavior in high school:

Whenever I think back to high school, I am embarrassed. When teachers would hand me a test, I would hand it back to them and tell them not to bother. I skipped school. I hung out with losers. I was immature and I was in with the wrong crowd. I was surrounded by bad people.

Alana looked back at her high school experience and was disappointed by her choices of friends, lack of focus on academics, and her behavior and attitude. It is always valuable to look at the message behind the behavior, and in Alana’s case she was clearly disengaged and disinterested in school. What can schools do to engage students who have clearly deprioritized school?

Franklin Park High School administrators were committed to building relationships with students who struggled with behavior, connecting them to positive activities that they were interested in, and developing relationships with their families so there was consistent limits and expectations at both home and school.

**Attendance.** Attendance issues were a factor that impacted both the at-risk students who graduated and the at-risk students who dropped out. Franklin Park High School has a policy that students who are absent from class more than twelve times in a semester are no longer eligible to earn credit in a course. Students with legitimate illnesses or family emergencies can appeal their absences at the end of the semester and students can make-up absences in the New Start Program or in summer school. All six students had difficulty consistently going to school, getting to school on time, and leaving early. The students each discussed some of the reasons why they did not attend school. Chronic absenteeism is a clear risk factor for students dropping out of school.
(Sparks, 2010). This makes sense because students who are not enjoying or are particularly engaged in school are less likely to attend consistently. The three students who dropped out Alana, Allison, and Sharon all cited lack of credits due to attendance and the need to complete an extra semester or year as a factor contributing to why they chose to drop out school. Despite opportunities through interventions mentioned previously such as the New Start credit recovery program, students with attendance issues were unable to recover and graduate. Compare that to Shane or Sonny who committed to completing their work and attending school. There is a clear connection between student goals, attendance, and graduation. It may be worthwhile for school administrators to examine attendance policies and weigh that against students not receiving their high school diploma. All three dropouts interviewed for this study were capable of completing high school level work, completed their GED requirement quickly after dropping out of school, and demonstrated the capacity to complete college level work. Attendance, or just showing up, can be the difference in an at-risk high school student graduating or dropping out. It is unclear if more intervention in this area would yield positive results or more resistance from students who have sporadic attendance or are reluctant to attend school. Perhaps exploring some of the flexible enrollment options could help some at-risk students to successfully complete high school.

**Student Retention.** Student retention in prior grades can also be an issue. These students have experienced difficulty in school and may have struggled in a number of areas. These students can struggle with academics, attendance, behavior, or social issues. Students who are retained can also lose their peer group. Students who were retained in previous grades can enter high school as old as sixteen. They are much older than the other members of their grade and sometimes have different interests and a lack of connection. This can be especially difficult
when their peer group has graduated and moved to college, work, or other post-secondary opportunities. The positive news here is that the retention rate for Franklin Park High School district overall was lower than the overall state rate. In 2010 Franklin Park district’s retention rate was 1.4% compared to the state rate of 2.1% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). In 2011, Franklin Park district’s rate of 1.3% was similarly positive compared to the state retention rate of 2.1% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Both the state and the local rate improved in 2012. Franklin Park High School had a retention rate of 0.8% compared to the state rate of 1.9% (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). This lower retention rate could contribute to the districts slightly above state average graduation rates. A central office administrator expressed their opposition to retention as a school district policy. He stated, “Holding students back, except in rare circumstances, does not do them any good. All of the literature and research shows the negative long term impact of retention on students; especially related to dropping out.” Franklin Park High School’s numbers and the districts numbers overall show a lower retention rate compared to the state overall.

Suspensions. One central office administrator discussed the relationship between suspensions and students being successfully engaged in school. He stated, “students who are suspended can feel alienated and disconnected from the school community”. Franklin Park High School’s suspension rates are significantly above state averages. In 2009-2010 school year the suspension rate at Franklin Park High School is 15.0 compared to the state average of 6.0 (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). This is approximately 2.5 times greater than the state average. In 2011 the disparity decreases lightly to 10.2 for Franklin Park High School compared to 5.6 for the state (Massachusetts Department of
Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). This is slightly less than double. In 2012 that difference increases to slightly more than double for Franklin Park High School compared to the state rate (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). It is interesting that the retention rate is markedly lower than the state average, but the suspension rate is significantly higher than the state average. Each of the six at-risk students was suspended for a variety of infractions over their high school career.

**Economic Factors.** Students face outside economic pressures and may be required to help out at home or hold multiple jobs to provide for themselves or their families. Allison discussed how economic factors impacted her ability to participate in extracurricular activities. Sonny’s family also struggled financially and he discussed how this might have influenced his views on career options and college. Poverty affects a student’s attendance, the ability to do homework, and having a connection to school. It is interesting to note that during the 2009-2010 the school district moved to an electronic lunch card system for all students that eliminated some of the stigma students felt who received free and reduced lunch. This can be evidenced from the percentage of students who were identified increased roughly by fifty percent and held steady over the next two school years. The economy may also be at play in relation to the increase in the numbers of students who are identified as eligible for free and reduced lunch. It does speak to the stigma some students and families living in poverty feel while living in a relatively low poverty community. Allison focused on how economics may have impacted her school engagement and connection to the various music programs available at the school. Students who live in poverty are significantly more likely to drop out of Franklin Park High School.

These at-risk students could continue the cycle of poverty by choosing to drop out. The economic prospects for a student who does not graduate from high school are extremely limited.
The long term outlook for individuals who do not graduate from high school is very bleak. Students who do not receive a high school diploma earn significantly less, are unemployed at higher rates, depend more heavily on government subsidies, and pay less in state and federal taxes than those who earn a high school diploma and those that further their education (Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Sum, 2007). Over a working lifetime someone who earns a bachelor’s degree earns on average more than $31,100 more per year than a high school dropout (University of Wisconsin-River Falls, 2007). The six at-risk students interviewed for this study were all either unemployed or under-employed and at the time of the interview none of the students were enrolled in college or any type of a training program. The three students who graduated from high school were also struggling from a financial perspective. Shane was unemployed and never pursued any additional education after high school; he was interested in looking for a job and did mention enrolling in college. Sonny was employed part-time, but lost his job. He also has not pursued any educational opportunities after high school. Patty is employed part-time in a minimum wage level position in the food services industry; she briefly pursued a vocational beauty school program but dropped out early on.

The three students who dropped out are having similar experiences. Alana is currently unemployed, but she has successfully completed some college courses and has plans of returning to college in the near future. Sharon is working part-time and is thinking of pursuing a training program for a job as a dental hygienist. Allison is employed part-time in the food services industry, has completed some college, and plans to return. The current employment and post-high school educational attainment is consistent with the research. The economy requires skilled, educated workers and those individuals who do not have the requisite skills or education are likely to struggle. All six of the students did not make direct connections to their educational
and long term economic prospects. Sonny and Shane both saw the importance of graduating from high school but failed to connect the correlation between educational attainment and income. Allison also failed to make that connection and even discussed a very successful outlier who dropped out of high school and is extremely wealthy and successful. These students did not consider the long term effects of dropping out of high school on their lifetime earning potential. It is unclear if the students are able to understand these connections and the potential result of their actions on their adult lives. Students may be considering more immediate factors and not looking at long term potential outcomes when deciding to remain in school until graduation or dropping out. Providing students with statistics and trends may not be the most effective way to convince them that dropping out is not in their best economic interests.

**Home Support.** Home support and family issues were key factors cited by several students during the interview process. Students faced strained relationships, parents who were struggling with their own issues, and a lack of support. Sharon discussed how her relationship with her mother was strained during her high school years. She attributed this to her performance in school, poor attendance, and behavior challenges. Sharon felt like she “knew it all” and her mother could not tell her anything. On a positive note, this relationship has evolved and Sharon currently describes her relationship with her mother as much better. She currently lives with her mother and feels supported by her mother. Parental relationships also affected student performance in the classroom and generally at school. Alana’s parents were going through a difficult divorce that shifted their focus off of her. Alana reported that her parents were more involved in disputes connected to their divorce than the problems she was facing both inside and outside of school. This allowed her to have a great deal of freedom and limited oversight or consequences for her behavior or lack of attendance at school. Patty’s parents were also divorced and this caused some difficulties for her as she navigated the tenuous and often antagonistic relationship of her parents. Five of the six students interviewed discussed their relationship with their parents; this indicated the importance of these relationships even when students are becoming more independent. Family issues
and dynamics do matter; students clearly benefit from supportive and structured home environments.

This is an external factor that schools and school personnel have little control over. Faculty members focused on the importance of communication and building positive relationships to improve educational outcomes for students who have significant home or family issues.

Some students have a lack of parental support at home. Some at-risk students’ parents failed to have success in school and the students continue that cycle of failure. One teacher stated, “Many students have issues at home with their parents or siblings. This can effect homework completion, study habits, attendance, and their overall attitude toward school.” Both Sonny and Shane discussed that their parents were not successful in school and had trouble helping them with their school work. These difficulties at home can also impact peer relationships. One administrator stated:

Students will start hanging out with a different peer group and this can sometimes have a negative impact on school performance and completion. Family dynamics and social dynamics can be inter-related. When students are struggling at home or with peers it can impact school. On the other hand, students who receive support are often more likely to be successful in school. Students who have parents who had success in school are probably more likely to provide support that is helpful to students who are struggling in high school.

Socioeconomic issues can impact a student’s readiness for school and their performance. Family issues and dynamics are a big part of a student being at-risk for dropping out of school.

Family and home life was seen as an important influence and factor for at-risk students. Teachers, counselors, building administrators, and central office administrators all discussed the importance of a supportive home environment and school success. Nearly all at-risk students had some sort of challenge at home that ranged from issues related to poverty, substance abuse,
physical or mental abuse, neglect, conflict with parents or siblings, lack of support for school work or homework, or a general lack of caring or interest. These students often forged relationships with adults in the building, but sometimes these connections were not enough to overcome external environmental issues or other issues students were wrestling with. The home dynamic is powerful and school personnel can provide support, intervention, and modify programs, but some partnership with the home and “being on the same page” with the school is valuable when there are significant home issues. Approximately one in six students struggle with issues related to poverty at Franklin Park High School. One teacher stated:

Franklin Park is a blue collar community. There is not tremendous affluence, but there are a percentage of families who really struggle. Many of our families are contractors or sub-contractors and the economy has hit many of these families hard. We probably actually have a higher percentage of children living in poverty than the free and reduced lunch numbers would suggest.

Both the faculty and at-risk students were able to cite multiple examples of how home and family issues affected student performance and attitudes toward school. A teacher shared how one family had three brothers who all dropped out of school and how the teacher attempted to provide extra support to the youngest sibling in the family. The teacher was hoping this extra support could lead the youngest child to a different outcome than her three brothers. An administrator discussed a story of a parent who was taking their child’s ADHD medication. This affected the student’s performance at school, their relationship with their parent, and the parent’s relationship with the school. Each at-risk student was able to provide an example of how their home environment impacted their school performance. It is important to note that this evidence
is mixed and each student was able to articulate both positive and negative aspects of their home experiences.

Economic and family issues were also cited as critical external issues by faculty. Students who do not receive adequate support or struggle due to issues of poverty can also struggle in school. The attrition rates are much higher for students from low income families than the general student population. Some students are also exposed to abuse or neglect which can affect a student’s focus on school, an ability to complete homework, and ability to cope with pressure and stress related to school and social connections. Franklin Park High School administrators, teachers, and counselors reached out to all six students, but it is difficult to measure the impact or effectiveness of that outreach. For Shane it clearly made a difference, but he also re-focused himself on completing high school. Alana and Sharon clearly had several positive connections and relationships with faculty, but they were unable to change their behavior or performance because graduating from high school never was a clear priority. The students clearly benefited from positive faculty relationships, but for the students who dropped out those relationships were not powerful or compelling enough to push them toward graduation. Each student could describe both positive and negative relationships with faculty. These positive relationships did make a difference, but the relationships alone could not sustain a student to graduation.

**Peer Relationships.** Peer relationships have a powerful influence on students during their high school career. Students experience both positive and negative peer influences throughout their high school experiences. The impact of negative peer relationships was one key area that was highlighted both by the at-risk students who dropped out of school and the at-risk students who graduated. All of the students interviewed for this study could point to several
peers that either dropped out of school, skipped school or classes regularly, or were involved in drugs and alcohol or the party culture. It appears that at-risk students may be more likely to be influenced by negative peer relationships because of their choices related to school, drugs and alcohol, and being drawn to friends who have similar outlooks. Several teachers discussed the negative impact of a party culture on a sub-set of at-risk students. This negative party culture can draw some students away from a focus on school. This can also lead to abuse of drugs and alcohol. These relationships are important to students and can influence them to make bad choices.

Shane graduated from Franklin Park High School but many of his friends did not; he described them as a pull away from school when he was not attending during his first two years of high school. Shane talked about how if he wanted to skip a class or the whole school day he always had someone to “hang out with”. Sharon also discussed how her best friend dropped out of school and how many of the people in her social circle were making bad choices that she was also engaged in. Sharon consistently skipped school with her best friend, and once her best friend dropped out of school she always had someone to spend time with if she did not want to go to school. Sharon also faced significant relationship issues as she was in an abusive relationship. This was another negative peer relationship that pushed her away from the school setting because the abusive boyfriend also attended Franklin Park High School. Alana noted how she was engaged with a “bad crowd” who were into the party scene. Alana also talked about how she always hung around with older kids and how in retrospect this was a very bad decision. Patty transferred in during high school and had a difficult time developing positive peer relationships with students at Franklin Park High School; she had similar struggles at her previous school which is a big part of the reason she transferred to Franklin Park High School.
All of these at-risk students had interactions with what they described as a negative peer group. It is noteworthy that all of the students did not blame their peers for their poor choices, but the students blamed themselves for making decisions to hang around or befriend other students who were engaged in negative behaviors. Each student was drawn to a group that was making poor choices and having similar difficulties in school. Although it may be difficult to generalize across all at-risk students based on the sample size, the fact that all six students could point to significant negative peer influences cannot be coincidental.

**Drugs and alcohol.** The influence of drugs and alcohol were a theme that was prevalent in the student interviews. Allison, Patty, Alana, and Shane all discussed the pull of the “party culture” and how it negatively impacted their school performance and attendance. Each of these student offered multiple of examples of friends that they could skip school or classes with and engage in this type of risky behavior. Alana talked about hanging around with older students early in her high school career and how those students were into “bad things”. A school administrator mentioned that although drugs and alcohol are not pervasive at Franklin Park High School, that it would be naïve to think that they are not a factor in the lives of the students who attend the school. The students all directly or indirectly discussed drugs and alcohol and how they functioned as a pull away from the school environment and school-related activities and responsibilities.

Faculty also highlighted the impact of alcohol and illegal substances. A counselor stated, “Drug use, alcohol, and a sense of hopelessness contribute to a student’s decision to drop out of school.” Some students engage in risky behaviors that can lead to struggles in school and at home. Some students become part of a “party culture” that exists. These students engage in a number of risky behaviors and are more likely to be late to school, skip school, get suspended,
fail courses, and drop out. Students who participate in this “party culture” also tend to have challenges at home and conflict with their family.

Some students are engaged in a “party culture” where the use of drugs and alcohol can be the norm. Students engage in risky behaviors that place them at risk of not completing high school. For a number of reasons students prioritize drinking alcohol and drug use above future goals and current success in school. Students engaged in this “party culture” are connected to a peer group that similarly believes that success in a high school is not a high priority. Negative peer pressure and having friends who have already dropped out can contribute to a student dropping out. Faculty members mentioned students engaged in drug use often have erratic attendance and can miss additional school due to stints in rehabilitation hospitals. Students involved in this “party culture” can also struggle with attendance and discipline issues when drugs, alcohol, or cigarettes are used on school grounds.

**Lack of school success.** Lack of prior school success can cause students to predict that they will have little success during their high school experience. Sonny, Shane, and Patty were quickly able to point out how they struggled in school throughout their educational careers. One administrator stated:

School can be a place where some students find only failure and frustration. Some students have struggled in school throughout their formal education. Sometimes these students have few positive academic role models and cannot get help with homework or studying from parents or guardians at home who may also have struggled in school. Students also get discouraged because of past poor performance and see that they have a lack of credits to graduate. Many of these students have had little success in school. These students do not see graduation as viable goal and many of these students can have limited goals beyond high
school. Students lack goals for the future or they cannot connect their future goals to their experiences in school. The educators discussed the importance of trying to make school feel relevant and developing strategies for students to find some success. Alana and Sharon both fell behind, were not particularly successful in their classes, and did not want to spend additional time in a place that they did not enjoy and felt few connections.

**Mental health issues.** Mental health issues can impact a student’s ability to complete high school. Faculty members mentioned how psychological issues can impact a student’s ability to successfully navigate the social and academic pressures of high school. Patty wrestled with mental health issues throughout high school and suicidal ideation caused her to miss a great deal of school as she was hospitalized. Patty ultimately graduated from high school, but she received a tremendous amount of support and significant interventions and specialized programming that helped her along the way. She spent some time in an inpatient treatment program and when she returned to the high school she enrolled in the alternative program. Patty credited the program and the teacher who ran the program, Mr. Williams, for being a key reason why she graduated and did not drop out of school. Additionally, the program provided significant out-patient support that coordinated services with the school’s educational programming. Patty’s success involved multiple levels of support and many students who face similar issues may not find the same level of resources and help.

Some students also suffer from mental health issues. This can cause a variety of social issues and academic issues. Patty outlined her struggles with depression and suicidal ideation and how it caused her to struggle in school. Fortunately she received support from outside providers and the school. Some students suffer in isolation because they can have undiagnosed mental health issues, they do not follow through on treatment options, or they are unable to access treatment. Students receive some support from the school psychologist and guidance office, but students suffering from significant mental health issues often require effective
coordination between home, school, and outside mental health providers. Students with mental health issues who also have other risk factors such as poverty, learning disabilities, or substance abuse are particularly vulnerable and at-risk for dropping out. A counselor stated, “Schools struggle to coordinate with private providers and families around mental health issues.” Barriers include a lack of trust, communication issues, or coordination issues. Sometimes the school and mental health providers have conflicting views on how to best serve students struggling with mental health issues. A question the focus groups wrestled with was how the school could better partner with community organizations and private providers. The special education team process can sometimes foster adversarial relationships with the school and these outside agencies as they can fight over a very limited pool of resources.

Psychological and psychiatric issues impact school performance, completion, and attendance. Students who struggle with mental health issues can have a difficult time focusing on academic work and often have social or behavioral issues. These challenges impact not only school, but their life at home as well. One counselor stated, “We have students who struggle with the invisible pain of mental illness. Some of these kids are able to cope, but others struggle in school. We have some services, but we need to do more.” There are not a high percentage of students who struggle with mental illness, but those students who face these challenges also struggle in the school setting. This is one area in particular that the faculty felt that Franklin Park High school could potentially do a better job with support. There are a number of inherent obstacles such as students and families feeling unwilling or uncomfortable sharing mental health issues or histories; HIPPA privacy regulations for other medical providers or counselors; and the school being unaware of how mental illness is impacting a student’s school performance.
Many students wrestle with mental issues. Some receive support from both school resources and outside resources, and some students do not receive support due to either an undiagnosed mental illness or a lack of follow through by the student or their family. One guidance counselor stated:

We have so many students who do not take their medication for some type of psychiatric condition or mental illness. Many students do not take their ADD or ADHD medication. Worse still many students self-mediate and turn to alcohol or drugs to deal with their depression or anxiety.

Faculty acknowledged that there was an issue both with students who were undiagnosed or not following through with treatment of their mental illness.

**Unrealistic future expectations.** Franklin Park High School faculty noted that sometimes students’ perceptions of their future prospects can be unrealistic. The at-risk student’s perspective can sometimes be skewed. Students believe that they can leave school prior to graduation, get a job, and everything will be “O.K.”. The goals or dreams of a student may not be realistic such as believing that they will be an athlete, movie star, or singer. Even when a student has more realistic career aspirations, connecting those aspirations to educational attainment at times does not directly match up. Each of the former students interviewed for this study were not engaged in full time employment or full time school. Additionally, some students have a sense of entitlement that the “world owes them something”. There is a mentality that things in life will be given to students and that there is no hard work connected to success. Many students have a difficult time connecting cause and effect. Sharon mentioned several potential careers that she was interested in, but she was not certain if she was willing to return to school to meet those aspirations. This can cause some students to not see the need or the value in a high
school education. Some students feel that high school is focused on getting into college, and if college is not my goal why am I wasting my time here. As stated previously, this can lead to disengagement and lack of a sense of purpose for a high school education.

**Negative relationships with faculty.** Many of the students relied on the positive relationships with faculty members at school, and several students mentioned the school librarian, a specific teacher, or an administrator who helped them deal with an issue. Although each student interviewed discussed positive relationships, there was also a focus in nearly every interview on a negative relationship with a Franklin Park High School faculty member. Shane frequently swore at teachers or was found insubordinate. He was able to temper his reactions to teachers that he did not like when he was a junior and senior, but Shane had a very difficult time when teachers set any kind of reasonable limit on him during his first two years of high school. Part of this change resulted from a realization that he wanted to graduate and needed to improve his interactions with faculty and staff at the school. Sharon discussed a social studies teacher who was focused on the cell phone rule and mentioned other teachers or staff members that she did not like for a variety of reasons. Allison specifically cited a math teacher who she did not like. Students described both negative and positive experiences with high school faculty which is not unusual or atypical for any student’s high school experience. Students’ were nearly equally emphatic in their description of the negative relationships that they had with faculty members as they fondly remembered staff members who reached out, helped them, or just listened.

**Connections to the school community.** Franklin Park High School faculty focused on the importance of students making connections. Each of the students interviewed for this study mentioned a lack of broad connections at school or not fitting in at school. Connections to
positive peer groups, teams, clubs, or the faculty are critical. These connections lead to greater investment in school and the broader school community. The three at-risk students who graduated did make some connections to faculty, but they were not engaged in any consistent school-based activities. These connections help to retain students and are more likely to lead students to graduate and experience success in the classroom and outside of the classroom. The opposite is also true. Students can leave because of a lack of connection to other students, teachers, the school, or the community. Sharon discussed how a negative relationship pushed her away from a school activity and contributed to her not graduating. One special educator stated, “Having a concerned adult is valuable for students who are on the edge. Having someone in your corner can make a huge difference.” Each of the at-risk students could point to several faculty members who supported them at some time during their high school careers.

All three students who dropped out lacked connections to the school community and were minimally involved in any extracurricular activities. Both Alana and Sharon started out participating in cheerleading as freshmen, but both stopped participating and did not engage in any other activities. They were drawn to other non-school related activities that were not very positive and contributed to their attendance issues. Allison specifically stated that she was not connected to the school community through activities or positive peer relationships. Allison partially attributed this to financial obstacles. Allison did have a strong interest in music, but she did not participate in any of the school’s extracurricular music offerings. Sonny, Shane, and Patty, the three at-risk students who graduated, did not participate in any activities outside of classes either. Their connections to school personnel were more driven by their at-risk status than any other factor. This is also true of the three students who dropped out; their attention from faculty was predominantly driven by their academic, attendance, and behavioral issues.
The high school has attempted to develop diverse extracurricular offerings, but offerings alone may not further engage students in the school community. It is noteworthy that each of the six at-risk students was able to develop meaningful and sustained relationships with faculty members, but was not able to develop any sustained or long term connections to school groups or activities.

Why Students Choose to Stay in School

The vast majority of students within the sub-set of at-risk students are able to complete high school and graduate from Franklin Park High School. The 20% of at-risk kids who leave school before graduation receive approximately the same formal and informal interventions that the 80% of at-risk kids who graduate receive. A variety of interventions and supports are important for students who are struggling to meet all the requirements and deadlines for graduation. One administrator stated that students need “constant, gentle coaxing”. This can take a variety of forms from informal check-ins to more formalized interventions. Programs like summer school and New Start provide students multiple opportunities to earn credits and get students back on track. These programs help students after they go “off track” but it is equally important to work with students before they fall off track and require programs that help them recover credits due to either failure or poor attendance. Students need to realize that after a mistake they can recover and it is “not the end of the world”. The need to engender a sense of perspective in students is valuable.

Focus on college preparation and graduation. Franklin Park High School is relatively successful retaining students and educating students through graduation. The vast majority of students are able to graduate within four years and more than eighty percent of graduates report that they enroll in either a two year or four year post-graduate college program. Clearly,
Franklin Park High School works to prepare students for college or life after high school. There are several interventions and programs that can support students who are at risk of not graduating and help to support these students to remain in school and graduate. Faculty and administrators were able to quickly list a number of these interventions and programs. A number of factors contribute to a high level of student success and high school completion including a focus on goal setting and educational plans after high school completion, a culture of high faculty expectations, student growth and development, positive peer and faculty connections, positive impact of administrators, family support, special education, guidance department, student support program, credit recovery program, freshman transition program, and extracurricular sports and activities.

**Student goals.** It is important that students have graduation as a goal. Some students, as noted previously, do not have high school graduation as a goal or do not see the value in a high school diploma. The small sample of students interviewed for this study had access to many of the same interventions, programs, and supports; three graduated and three dropped out. Four of the six students focused on their own individual choices and goals. Sonny stated that, “You need to do it all on your own.” He acknowledged the help and support that he received, but it came down to his individual choices and efforts. Similarly, Shane stated, “I graduated because I ended up doing the work.” Shane understood the importance of graduating from high school for his future and realized that it was “on him” to complete the work and requirements. The three students interviewed who did not graduate were quickly able to earn their GED, but none of these students saw the importance of graduating from high school. These students had the same access to interventions of the three students who did graduate. The students who graduated did take advantage of several programs or interventions and this helped them meet their goal of
graduation, but it also speaks to Knesting and Waldron’s concept of resilience and goal orientation.

The high school faculty tries to focus students on a plan or their goals. Goals focus on what an individual or an organization wants to accomplish; in this case the individual goal of a high school student should be graduation and the goal of the high school organization is a high graduation rate. The school is designed to support student success and goal attainment, but some students do not see high school graduation as a valuable goal or have found little success in school. Counselors try to focus students on their future and get them thinking about “what they want to be when they grow up” or at least what they want to do when they complete their high school education. Administrators, counselors, and teachers use a number of tools and programs to check that students are on track and implement interventions when students are not on track. The guidance staff tries to discuss all options with students and educate them on the impact of their choices. A student’s focus on the goal of high school graduation is a key component. The literature presents mixed evidence on the effectiveness of interventions on the dropout rate. Despite considerable governmental investment in dropout intervention programs that the effectiveness of these investments is limited (Rumberger, 2011).

**Faculty expectations.** There is a culture in place that views high school graduation as a given and a stepping stone for furthering education. Expectations of the high school and the community are relatively high. Students are expected to graduate from high school and enroll in college. This is an expectation of the majority of students and their families. The community at large also expects students to get accepted and enroll in college. One administrator stated, “college is the school and community expectation; this is what we are preparing our students for”. This may also be why students who are not planning on college as a post-secondary option
may struggle to see relevancy in the curriculum and school culture. This expectation that education must continue beyond high school is engendered in the school culture. This may be part of the disconnect for those students and families who are not planning on college after high school and a contributing factor to why many students do graduate and enroll in college after graduation. Many different programs in the school support this culture that expects students to graduate and continue on to a college program.

The high school faculty has an expectation that all students will complete high school, but in reality there are a percentage of students each year who choose to leave school prior to graduation. Once students make a decision not to complete their high school education guidance counselors provide the student with post high school options such as GED programs or job corps. The three students interviewed for this study all completed their GED requirements almost immediately after high school. Counselors and administrators interviewed for this study confirmed that a great majority of students who leave before graduating complete their GED program with “relative ease”. Additionally students do not leave high school because of failure to meet the MCAS requirements of passing mathematics, English, and science tests in order to receive a diploma. This suggests that students have the skills to pass classes and meet standards set by the state of Massachusetts. Academic rigor is not the reason why students leave; some other factors are also at play.

The counselors provide information related to income, education, and realistic costs of living. Counselors also provide students with detailed information about post-secondary educational options. The majority of students who graduate from Franklin Park High School enroll in either four year or two year colleges after graduation. In 2011 eighty-seven percent of Franklin Park High School graduates pursued a college education after they graduated
(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). The guidance staff works tirelessly to match students with the best possible post-secondary options for students. One example of this is the use of a software package used by the guidance office that provides students with good information about education and careers. Counselors also connect students with college recruiters, college fairs, and help to arrange campus visits. For students who are not looking for college after high school graduation counselors provide those students with information about training programs, technical schools, and other vocational opportunities. The guidance office provides a comprehensive set of services and supports that works to meet the needs of all students. Even those students who drop out receive options to move toward a GED or a variety of training programs. There is a culture in place that views high school graduation as a given and a stepping stone for furthering education. Expectations of the high school and the community are relatively high. Students are expected to graduate from high school and go to college. This is an expectation of the majority of students and their families. The community at large also expects students to get accepted and enroll in college. One administrator stated, “college is the school and community expectation; this is what we are preparing our students for”. This may also be why students who are not planning on college as a post-secondary option may struggle to see relevancy in the curriculum and school culture. This expectation that education must continue beyond high school is engendered in the school culture. This may be part of the disconnect for those students and families who are not planning on college after high school and a contributing factor to why many students do graduate and enroll in college after graduation. Many different programs in the school support this culture that expects students to graduate and continue on to a college program.
**Student development and growth.** Students also grow and develop significantly over the course of their high school career. Some students who struggle during their freshman and sophomore years are able to develop the skills and discipline necessary to successfully complete their high school program. Shane is a good example of this. He was not focused on high school graduation during his first two years, but he decided that graduation was something he needed to do, was willing to complete all of the work, and received support from key personnel. Many students develop maturity on their own and are hooked into the school setting in some way. This can include participation in clubs and activities or finding success in classes. All of the students interviewed mentioned challenges that they faced during their first two years of high school. Although half of the students interviewed overcame those challenges, the actual percentage of at-risk students who overcome academic, behavioral, or social difficulties are able to persevere and graduate is much higher than fifty percent.

**Positive peer and faculty connections.** All of the students were able to specifically discuss a positive relationship with a teacher, librarian, or administrator. Patty described her positive relationships with school administrators and teachers in the alternative program. She clearly benefited from this additional support and assistance. It appears these relationships were helpful for the three students who graduated, but having positive connections to a concerned adult were not enough for the three students who decided to drop out of school. Although, all three of the students who dropped out also were able to provide clear examples of faculty who listened, tried to help or provide support, or worked with them during their high school career. The relationships are important, but students need to also have a clear goal of high school graduation and work toward their goal.

Connections to peers and faculty are valuable. This appears to be a recurring theme and was addressed multiple times by teachers, counselors, and administrators in each of the focus groups. One teacher stated that, “friends can be a strong positive influence for students who are
on the fence”. Most students are focused on graduating from high school and moving on to college and many of these students support their peers along that main path. There is an amazing number of clubs, sports, and activities that create natural connections around a common interest or common goal. Students develop many positive relationships through sports or clubs that further connect them to the school environment. Staff members also do a good job of connecting to students. One teacher stated, “Information about students who are struggling can come from those relationships students develop with staff members”. One teacher provided an example of a student who was concerned about a friend who was not living at home. The teacher followed up with the student’s friend and was able to connect them to the guidance office. The guidance office was able to access resources in the community to support the student who was in fact homeless. These types of scenarios play out nearly every day in the high school. These positive connections can lead to additional support or access to resources.

There are a number of internal and external personnel that connect with students and provide help and support when students are facing an issue or are in crisis. Teachers and guidance counselors regularly assist students with academic and social issues. One teacher cited the fact that many students meet with teachers before school, after school, and during lunch time for help and guidance. The school psychologist and school resource officer are connected to students and can help them address difficult or challenging issues. A teacher also remarked how administrators are able to forge relationships with students and their families who are struggling. Additionally, the school has relationships with several outside agencies and service providers that help students who are in crisis.

Franklin Park High School partners with several outside agencies to support at-risk students including the police department, fire department, and the district attorney’s office. Each
month school officials participate in a Community Based Justice meeting where agencies share information about students who are court involved that ensures students receive the most appropriate interventions. This also places the school and outside agencies on the same page. Additionally, the school partners with the police department to have a school resource officer on-site at the high school and an attendance officer who works with students who are struggling with school attendance throughout the district. The high school identifies students who have attendance issues and partners with the judicial system to provide additional resources and support for students who are struggling to get to school.

The faculty of the school is very caring. They are invested in student success and take it personally when students are not successful. Each of the students interviewed for this study could identify multiple faculty members who demonstrated caring or provided direct support to them. One teacher stated, “I bet every student will be able to name a faculty member who personally and directly took an interest in them.” Another teacher stated that it is critical that one adult takes an interest in them and this is “identified in all of the research around at-risk kids”. One special educator discussed a sixth grade student who had three brothers who dropped out of school and how she provided extra “face time” and attention to the student to try to keep her on the right track. Teachers are focused on student success or getting additional resources or interventions in place when students are not experiencing success and may be at-risk for dropping out. An administrator stated:

People enter the teaching profession to help students succeed. The teachers at Franklin Park High School care about the students and want them to find success and have a positive future. That is why so many students graduate and move on to college.
The faculty care and have high expectations for all students who enter Franklin Park High School. This is what contributes to a very high percentage of students graduating and a low percentage of students dropping out.

**Positive impact of administrators.** Administrators focus a great deal of their time on at-risk students. School administrators and district administrators team with teachers, counselors, parents, and the at-risk students to create plans to ensure a student graduates. Several of the students interviewed stated the importance of the relationship and the time building level administrators spent working and talking with them was to their staying in school until they graduated or how this attention helped students who dropped out stay in school for a longer period of time than they otherwise would have. Administrators also develop policies that can help students stay in school and graduate. At Franklin Park High School administrators have developed and supported several programs such as the New Start program, alternative classroom, freshman transition program, and the student support team to support at-risk students through their high school experience. All building level and district level administrators discussed a strong interest in helping more at-risk students work through whatever issues they were facing and graduate. All administrators interviewed for focus groups understood the dire economic consequences drop outs faced when entering the world of work after leaving high school. It was also interesting to note that each administrator was able to articulate stories of specific students who were at-risk of not graduating school and either how they persevered and graduated or why they may have dropped out.

One administrator discussed the importance of building relationships with at-risk students from the very beginning of a student’s high school experience:
Building relationships with students at the very beginning when they enter the school as freshmen is important. This way when issues arise, the faculty is better able to address them in a context because they know the student. Administrators develop relationships with students who are struggling with behavior, academics, or attendance. They regularly check in with the student due to these issues, but also informally in the hallway or cafeteria.

The administrator emphasized that they were working with all students and their families who were struggling with a variety of issues. Connections to both the student and their family are important. The value of school engagement cannot be minimized. One administrator discussed the importance of not becoming angry, but discussing why a student’s actions were inappropriate or not productive to prevent the behavior from occurring again. One central office administrator stated, “Maintaining and developing positive relationships with students is critical”. The family component was mentioned in each focus group. Teachers, counselors, and administrators all seemed to understand the value in developing relationships and connections with the home. One counselor stated:

Outreach does not always work. Sometimes the relationship is adversarial and it is very difficult to build bridges between home and school. It doesn’t mean we stop trying, but sometimes there are significant barriers that we are unable to overcome.

These barriers could be based on a variety of factors such as past negative school experiences of older siblings, past negative experiences of the parent or guardian, or significant issues that the parent or guardian is dealing with at home that prevent them from becoming more positively engaged at school.
One way to create these connections is supporting students to participate in extracurricular activities. Administrators try to work with students to link their interests to activities or groups in the school community. Administrators help at-risk students enroll in clubs or sports, and assist students who have limited economic means with paperwork to waive fees or associated costs of extracurricular participation. Engaging students in sports and activities connect students to school. One administrator stated:

Sports are a great way to hook kids into school, but not all kids are into sports. So you listen to what their interests are and try to connect them to a positive peer group that shares their interest. This is not always possible, but when it works; it really works.

Simply listening to students can help.

Administrators can assist with their school related problems and assist them with problems that block or distract students from their school work or attending school. One building level administrator stated, “Students who have more positive role models are more likely to graduate”. The administrator went on to discuss articles that he read that outlined the importance of:

- good relationships with all students, places where students could comfortably share their problems, and ways for students to come back from academic or other types of mistakes early in their high school career.

Teachers, counselors, and administrators all agreed with the value of relationships between administrators and students as a tool to encourage at-risk students to graduate from high school. It is important to set clear expectations for all students and have consistent consequences when students do not meet those clear expectations. One building level administrator stated, “Students need to feel that they are being treated fairly; that all students are treated fairly. If students feel that there is inherent inequity then they are less likely to buy-in to what we are trying to do.”
A counselor continued by saying, “Students need to feel safe. If they are in an environment that is predictable and consistent students are more likely to feel secure and more likely to experience success.” Creating an environment that is safe, consistent, and predictable is valuable for all students. Administrators contribute to the creation of organizational norms, culture, and interventions for students who are not meeting expectations. Administrators are also able to direct efforts to monitor student progress and intervention and are able to target students who have shown evidence of being at-risk by attendance, behavioral, or academic issues.

Consistent communication is important. Students need communication when things are not going well or simply receiving a “hello” in the hallway. This goes back to building relationships. One administrator stated:

Some students do not have many positive interactions during a typical day. I like to say hello and ask them about a favorite song, sports team, TV show, or movie. Students are savvy and can smell it when you are talking just to talk. You need to make authentic connections. Regular contact is one way to do that.

Consistently communicating also allows administrators to assess how students are doing, if they need to be connected to some other support in the building, or simply to check their mood. Additionally, one central office administrator discussed the importance of checking-in with a student’s family when things were going well, “many of these families are used to hearing just negative communications from schools; it is important to call parents when things are going well also”. All administrators interviewed for this study agreed with the importance of consistent communication with at-risk students and their families. One administrator stated:

Although communication with at-risk families and their parents is very important; many times these students and families can be difficult to communicate with effectively.
Sometimes you feel like the kid or the parent is working against their best interests and options. When parents don’t value or prioritize education it is difficult for the student to see school as a top priority. This is part of why this type of communication is both important and challenging.

The administrators also discussed how difficult it was to tell if their efforts were yielding any positive results until a student who is at-risk for dropping out either graduates or in fact drops out.

Both building and district level administrators help shape and implement school policy. School administrators can make the school environment either more or less welcoming for at-risk students. Administrative actions can be overt or subtle. One district level administrator discussed this:

Students know when a teacher or principal is sincerely taking an interest in them as opposed to going through the motions. When principals say they are committed to working with high risk populations that is one thing. When they actually do it consistently that is another.

This commitment can take many forms such as support to programs such as freshman transition, Student Support Team, and New Start. Administrators who are flexible and can work with students who are struggling can help these students to be more successful in the school environment. Again, policies that support the home-school connection are critically important.

A central office administrator stated, “Kids who struggle at school also struggle at home. Any support that we can provide students and parents can maybe help them navigate both the school and home worlds.” Parents need support and guidance to help them support students who are
struggling in school. School personnel need to recognize that if educators are struggling with a child there is a good chance that the parents or guardians are also facing challenges at home.

A school culture that values constant learning and improvement can assist at-risk students in their journey to high school graduation. Effective schools and systems are constantly exploring strategies to improve results and outcomes. Increasing the graduation rates and decreasing the dropout rate are two areas that both high school administration and district administration can collaborate to improve results. One central office administrator stated, “Evaluate current practices or initiatives with a focus on keeping students in school. Ensure an appropriate level of staffing. What are we doing to encourage graduation? What are other school districts doing?” Critically examining your own practices and looking at models in other communities that have been successful can improve outcomes for at-risk students. Franklin Park High School has embraced a variety of changes and shifts to work with students who are at-risk of dropping out over the past five years.

**Family support.** Family support is critical; and higher levels of family support for at-risk students leads to higher levels of success. The school reaches out to families in a variety of ways. Traditional programs such as open houses, back to school nights, and parent-teacher conference nights engage a high number of parents and guardians. The guidance office also offers a number of programs that focus on the college process, financial aid, and selecting high school courses. Faculty felt that the most effective outreach for at-risk students occurred on an individual basis and happened at a personal level. A guidance counselor stated that she meets regularly with students and their families of students who are at-risk of not graduating or not graduating on time. Counselors and administrators sit down with students and their families to
develop plans that are realistic and attainable. Family engagement is an important aspect of keeping families informed and students on track for graduation.

**Special education.** The special education department provides a number of supports for students with disabilities to work toward graduation. Many of these supports are dependent on a particular student’s disability and are determined by the team process and the development of a student’s individual education plan. Students who receive special education services can waive credits or required classes based on their disability or academic needs. For example one special educator stated, “Some students may opt out of their foreign language requirement. Some students may receive their instruction in a small group setting.” A student’s individual education plan (IEP) develops goals, educational service delivery, and any needed supports around the student’s learning needs based on their defined disability. Approximately 18% of students at Franklin Park High School receive special education services (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). This is above the state average. It is noteworthy that students with special needs in Franklin Park perform worse than their peers across the state on the MCAS tests (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012).

Four years ago the district developed an alternative program to support students who struggle in the general high school program in a much smaller setting that attends to students’ academic, social, and emotional needs. The alternative program assists students in the past who would not have graduated. Students enrolled in the alternative program receive much of their instruction in the alternative program, but many students receive instruction in the general program as well. The program is flexible and designs academic programs around the needs of the students it serves. The alternative classroom has had some success engaging students who were not able to make it in traditional classrooms. Both Shane and Patty participated in the
alternative program and liked the small classes, individual attention, and the support that the program provided. Shane also enrolled in several small group classes that provided more support to meet his individual needs. The alternative program and the staff work to connect students to the school and try to build on student success. This program provides flexibility, more one on one interaction with the classroom teacher, develops social skill training, and curriculum at each individual student’s pace and instructional level. An administrator stated, “The alternative program has helped some students who otherwise would not have graduated. It provides a more manageable academic environment and program.”

The special education department is focused on meeting student needs and supporting them through graduation. A district level special education administrator stated:

The special education department is committed to providing a high level of service for their most involved students. Increasingly better defined transition plans for students who are on IEPs help students to move from a high school program to services these students will receive as an adult. The LEAP program engages students who are more involved up until the age of 22.

There are many options and opportunities for students with special needs to work toward their diploma and receive appropriate supports. Students with special needs still graduate at much lower rates than their non-disabled peers. Students with special needs also perform worse compared both to their non-disabled peers and students with disabilities across the state when measured by the state MCAS tests administered yearly from third grade until tenth grade. Franklin Park High School needs to examine how to provide additional supports to increase the academic performance and graduation rates of this vulnerable population.
Guidance department. The guidance department is a critical support for at-risk students. Guidance counselors work with students on a broad array of issues and connect students to resources within the school department and to outside community agencies. Patty talked about her positive relationship with her guidance counselor as a factor that contributed to her graduating. Guidance counselors work with students on social issues as well. Patty also mentioned the coordination between the guidance office and the social workers provided by her outside mental health provider as key to her keeping up with her coursework when she was hospitalized and transitioning back to the school setting. Guidance counselors can serve as the bridge between a student, their parents, and teachers.

This results in counselors becoming a sort of student ombudsmen. One administrator stated:

Guidance counselors provide support for students in a variety of ways. The counselors work tirelessly on behalf of all students and also work closely with parents to help them provide the structure and supports their child may need.

The guidance office works with students throughout their high school career helping students develop their schedules, selecting courses, monitoring student progress toward graduation, and providing resources when students are struggling.

The guidance office helps students in different ways each year. Counselors help freshman and sophomores schedule courses and work with students who are struggling in courses or facing a variety of issues. During an at-risk student’s junior year, guidance counselors develop graduation plans with students and their families that set clear goals with graduation as the final target. During their senior year, students who are still short of the required credits for graduation may take correspondence courses or outside internships. Communication between
home and school with guidance counselors, teachers, or administrators can help an at-risk student get back on track toward graduation. These plans and goal setting processes can help student get back on track or gain focus toward graduation.

Three years ago the district hired a school psychologist to support the social and emotional needs of students at the high school. The school psychologist can support students who are struggling with social emotional issues. One building administrator stated, “The hiring of a school psychologist to serve the needs of individuals and small groups of students who are at-risk helps to meet their needs.” A counselor continued:

This was a huge gap in services we provided. This addition has helped not only to support at-risk students broadly, but has provided additional services to our special education department. Many of those students are at-risk of not graduating on time or not graduating at-all. The new psychologist provides support and strategies to staff who are working with these at-risk students.

Faculty agreed that the hiring of a school psychologist was a very positive step in supporting at-risk students at the high school. The school psychologist works collaboratively with the guidance department to ensure that student needs are addressed and met.

Student support program. Traditionally the high school has convened a student support program made up of guidance counselors, teachers, and administrators. The student support program discusses at-risk students that are referred by staff and creates plans or provides support based on a student’s individual needs. Students are identified by academic issues, behavioral concerns, negative attendance trends, identified psychiatric or psychological issues impacting school performance, or family or community issues. Additionally, the high school is beginning to implement a Response to Intervention program to support students who are
struggling academically or behaviorally. This tiered intervention program occurs within the classroom and outside the classroom through targeted interventions. The program also requires communication between the guidance office and the school administration to identify students who may be at-risk and allows the school to provide appropriate support.

**Credit recovery programs.** Many students are able to take advantage of a credit recovery program offered by Franklin Park High School. This program represents a partnership between the high school and the community services office who administers the program. The New Start Program and summer school provide students with an opportunity to earn credits when they failed a course with a grade of 50 or greater or lost credit due to absences. Students attend a number of make-up classes due to attendance issues or re-take a course that they previously failed. The New Start program is an after school program during the school year. New Start offers students an opportunity to get back on track for graduation. All six at-risk students enrolled in either a summer school course or a New Start course. Shane saw the value in these programs because he consistently struggled with attendance. “New Start gives students a second chance. Without this and summer school I might not have graduated.”

Many students are able to take advantage of this program and move forward toward graduation. One administrator stated:

The New Start program has really helped several students who got off track during the school year and helped to get them back on track. The program works in two ways. It provides students with a second chance and helps them focus in classes they may currently be enrolled in or classes that they take in the future because they do not want to put the time in again in New Start. They are more focused on passing classes when they
take it the first time. It is really a successful program and one of our best interventions to get students back on track for graduation.

A teacher stated, “The New Start Program is another opportunity for students who have struggled to get back on track for credits and on course to graduate.” These types of second chance programs help students who have failed courses or struggled with attendance to get “back on track” for graduation.

**Freshman transition program.** During the past five years the school administration developed a freshman transition program to support the transition for students from middle school to the high school. This transition can be difficult for some students and many students who are at-risk for not graduating often struggle in their classes and socially during this transition. All six at-risk students described their struggles during their freshman year. The freshmen transition program helps students enter the high school. An administrator stated:

> There is a clear correlation between the number of courses they fail, attendance, and a student being at-risk for dropping out of school. The freshman transition programs help students acclimate to the high school; this program helps students feel comfortable with their transition to the high school.

The transition program includes a tour of the high school during eighth grade, an orientation program during the summer before freshman year, connecting each freshman with an upper classman, and several programs throughout the freshman year presented by the guidance office. The goal of this program is to support all students with a particular focus on the students who are failing courses during their freshman year and who are becoming at-risk for not graduating from high school.
**Extracurricular sports and activities.** Extracurricular sports and activities can provide an incentive or a “hook” for students to remain in school. One of the goals for the high school administration is to provide opportunities for students who have diverse interests. One administrator stated, “The development of more “off-beat” clubs that meet the varied needs of students is important to build buy-in such as anime, rock climbing, and baking.” Traditional sports and clubs also provide students with healthy and appropriate outlets for their interests. A coach stated:

Research shows that student athletes perform better in their classes during seasons when they are also engaged in a sport. We have many athletes who excel on the court or field, but may be less successful in school. Sports provide some students with discipline and help them better manage their time. Sports can be an incentive for students to study and work harder in school.

An administrator stated, “There is real value in sports and after school activities. These activities build school culture and spirit and help connect kids to the school and the community”. It is important to note that none of the at-risk students interviewed for this study were engaged in an extracurricular activity throughout their high school career.

**Strategies to Reduce the Dropout Rate**

Administrators, teachers, and counselors had a number of interesting ideas to reduce the dropout rate in the Franklin Park community. The responses fell into several broad categories that included the importance of developing relationships, enrollment and program flexibility, goal setting, instruction and programs, and supports for external factors. Budgets and resources can be obstacles when exploring ways to address a problem or an issue, but it is clear that the faculty and students had a number of ideas to improve educational outcomes for at-risk students.
It is noteworthy that the faculty was interested in finding ways to reduce the number of students who drop out of Franklin Park High School. The at-risk students also wanted more students to graduate and shared some of their ideas.

**Relationships.** A common theme for students and the faculty was the importance of relationships within the school setting. Franklin Park High School has a number of ways to develop these important formal and informal relationships. The teacher-student and coach-student relationships are two regularly occurring formal relationships that are built into the school fabric, but not all students develop close or important relationships with their teacher and a percentage of students do not participate in sports or activities. One faculty member stated, “Some teachers are also better at building relationships with students than other teachers.” This is also true of administrators, counselors, and coaches. One teacher proposed the development of a formalized mentor-mentee or advisor-advisee program where every staff member is connected to a certain number of students. The teacher stated that, “this creates a built-in adult that follows a student over their four year high school career. This also reduces the number of kids who fall through the cracks and creates an advocate for that student for all four years of high school.” This proposal could meet some of those goals, but could also fall short based on the inability of some teachers and students forging positive relationships; the varying skill levels of faculty in developing meaningful relationships with students; and the willingness of faculty or students to engage in positive relationships that lead to better outcomes for students. The faculty member felt that this type of program could benefit more than just at-risk students, but it could also help students with homework completion, study skills, time management, the college application process, and social issues. The at-risk students clearly valued their relationships with faculty, but these relationships developed organically and were not part of a program or some requirement.
The way a relationship develops in the school setting may affect how the student perceives that relationship.

**Enrollment flexibility.** A counselor recommended creating more enrollment flexibility. The counselor stated,

Create more flexibility for students to enroll in multiple schools or programs. Students would be able to take courses in a traditional high school setting and possibly a technical school and online courses concurrently. This works at the college level; why not allow high school students to enroll in multiple institutions to earn their high school diploma. This type of programming could benefit students like Sonny or Patty who were not interested in pursuing college, but they were definitely interested in additional vocational training. Another faculty member added, “Also students could participate in dual enrollment in high school and college programs at the same time. We have had some success in the past with programs offered through state colleges and universities and local community colleges.” This might appeal to a student like Alana who was not engaged in the high school environment, but may have taken advantage of educational opportunities in another setting. Another teacher stated, “Offer more flexibility around taking classes because traditional day classes do not work for everyone.”

Currently students are able to enroll in courses at the high school and the current high school curriculum may not meet the needs of all the students served by the Franklin Park Public Schools. Roughly 15% of students each year indicate that they are not interested in attending college after graduation (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Appropriate programming for these students may be found at a local technical high school, community college, or some type of apprenticeship program offered in the community. Currently Franklin Park High School and the local vocational technical school view each other as
competitors for students and resources. If this relationship were to change or evolve it could provide greater flexibility and benefits for students.

This type of institutional sharing or combining resources could potentially provide immense tangible benefits for students. One administrator suggested, “Develop ways to share resources between institutions to benefit students”. This could extend to faculty, materials, or software. Another teacher offered, “Provide more elective programming that will appeal to a greater percentage of students. Ensure students have more access to online courses. This could provide a broader array of academic and non-academic offerings and allow students to have more scheduling flexibility.” These suggestions offer a number of appealing possibilities. If local secondary and post-secondary institutions could develop ways to share resources cooperatively and enroll students concurrently in multiple institutions, this could potentially benefit at-risk students by providing more appropriate and appealing opportunities and could benefit college bound students by enhancing high school resumes and experiences by offering more college level courses and experiences, authentic professional experiences, and a broader array of challenging courses. The possibilities here are intriguing, but often these institutions are competing for the same pool of financial resources and may be reluctant to give up a potential market share.

Several faculty members mentioned the block schedule as a challenge for some at-risk students because of the eighty-four minute length of each class period. One counselor suggested, “Examine scheduling and look at length of class periods and explore the possibility of modified blocks for some students”. A one-size fits all schedule may not work for all students. One teacher countered that, “there are positives and negatives to every schedule; it is more important to look at how teachers are using the time for each block or period”. The schedule is another
organizational variable that may have an effect on student retention. Sharon mentioned the length of classes as something that she did not enjoy about her high school experience. Sonny also struggled at times with the length of classes. Another scheduling related factor could be looking at classes that do not meet the needs of college focused students. One teacher stated, “Provide more options for academic success such as vocational programs”. This is also related to the flexible enrollment recommendations discussed previously.

**Goals.** Goals are important. One counselor stated, “Encourage students to write goals for themselves. The guidance office should place a greater emphasis on setting goals for all students”. The theoretical lens of goal theory would support this additional focus on student goal setting. Placing an additional emphasis on the goal of graduating from high school could prove beneficial for at-risk students. Creating clear goals that are measurable, attainable, and time bound can lead to greater student success and could potentially impact graduation rates. Student goal setting is not a new concept, but to use it for students on a broad basis to work toward graduation could be beneficial. Measurable goal setting for educators is embedded in the new Massachusetts Educator Evaluation System (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). This systematic approach to goal setting could trickle down to students and help all students to meet their long and short term goals.

**Instruction and programs.** In addition to taking a critical look at the schedule several faculty members expressed the importance at also looking at instructional practices. One teacher stated, “Place a greater emphasis on differentiated instruction to meet the needs of all students”. The teacher continued, “If teachers can differentiate their instruction then they can meet the needs of the struggling students in their room and potentially make the learning more relevant to the students in front of them.” Professional development at the high school focused on
differentiating instruction at the high school level could improve retention rates and academic performance for all students. This is counter that several faculty members made to criticism of the current block schedule that is in place. Teachers argue that it is not the schedule or the eighty-four minute blocks, but how teachers effectively provide instruction, assessment, and use the results from both formative and summative assessments to impact instruction.

Many students are not ready to meet the rigorous requirements of high school work and these students need assistance with time management, organizational skills, and study skills. Provide “support classes” that allow students to receive additional help and build “student skills”. These courses could become part of the freshman transition process or could be scheduled throughout a student’s career. Additionally, access to teachers who could assist students before and after school could also be beneficial. With some additional support more students could find greater success early in their high school careers when many at-risk students can struggle. Exploring how to provide additional support could help struggling students earn credits, increase organizational and study skills, and experience a greater level of consistent success in school. It is important to note that a sub-set of special education students are able to enroll in courses that provide academic support for the courses that they are enrolled in. These courses enroll a very small percentage of students overall.

**Supports for external factors.** Franklin Park faculty believes that external factors play a major role in student success or failure. They understand that a wide variety of external variables can impact student performance. One administrator said, “I would adopt them”, and discussed the importance of the influence of the home and how some of the students may have turned out differently if they grew up in “my house”. The administrator continued by citing several programs in cities that provide “a boarding school-like experience” for at-risk students
that produced positive results. Providing for a stable after school experience could help some students who face various struggles at home.

In many cases external factors are at the root of why students drop out or are at-risk for dropping out. A central office administrator proposed, “Provide housing for students who are struggling at home or do not have a home. Establish a boarding school schedule where there are six days of programming where one day a week students are engaged in sports or activities”. These types of programs and schedules could engage at-risk students in positive activities that could lead them away from some of the temptations and traps that some students can fall into.
The administrators agreed that providing out of school structure and support could lead to greater in-school success for at-risk students.

Parents of at-risk students also need additional support. It may be important to provide additional education or support to parents. An administrator stated, “Often we offer programs and have limited participation or participation from targeted audiences. It is important to get the groups we want to target. It may be helpful to offer parenting classes that are inviting to people.” Parents and schools tend to struggle with at-risk students. Another teacher stated, “It might be worth our time to investigate offering better wrap-around services that involve state and federal agencies.” The school currently offers sporadic programs for parents around substance abuse, bullying, and using online components of the curriculum, but there is very little regular embedded programming. Examining ways to better engage and support parents of at-risk children could yield some better outcomes.

Increase community involvement through internships and apprenticeships. Currently juniors and seniors are able to participate in internships at Franklin Park High School. These internships take place in the schools, with local businesses, and institutions. The faculty member
would like to see these programs expand and the rigor increase. The teacher stated, “It may be useful to connect students to future career internships through more of an apprenticeship model than the current internship set-up.” This could reach out to some students who were not focused on college as a real option after high school.
Chapter 5: Discussion of Findings

Introduction

The majority of the research on the drop out phenomenon is focused on high incidence drop out communities or broad statistical trends in student retention and attrition rates. This study focused on a low incidence drop out community and looking specifically at why students decide to drop out or remain in school and what factors impact the decision making process. The purpose of the research is to determine what factors impact at-risk student decision making, how school personnel and policy makers can impact practice to improve graduation rates and reduce attrition, and how schools can support at-risk students as they face the challenges of high school that occur both inside and outside of the school setting. It is interesting that at-risk students in low-incidence drop out communities face similar challenges to at-risk students in high-incidence drop out communities. The research for this study included three faculty focus groups, interviews and a records review of six at-risk students, and a review of school and district data. First, this section will examine the three research questions that are the focus of this study. These questions are:

1. What factors do at-risk students at Franklin Park High School explain as impacting their decision to drop out or graduate from school?
2. What factors do other stakeholders see as impacting at-risk students’ decisions to drop out or remain in school?
3. What are significant commonalities and differences between what students say about their decision to drop-out or graduate and what other stakeholders believe?

Next, this section will examine the research findings through the two theoretical lenses of goals theory and organizational theory. This is followed by a comparison between the findings from
this study and the existing literature. Next this section will address potential future research that could be conducted. Finally, this section will explore implications for practice.

**Summary of Findings**

This section will address the three research questions presented in this study. Students drop out of Franklin Park High School for a variety of reasons many of which are mirrored in the literature. There are internal factors related to the school such as a lack of success in the freshman year; the schools structures, cultures, and characteristics; courses and programming; student retention policies; the suspension rate; and social connections. There are also external policies that include family issues; economic issues; drug and alcohol use; and social connections outside of school. The internal school factors and external non-school factors both can contribute to a student graduating from high school or dropping out. Allison, Alana, and Patty’s experiences indicate that each of these students’ decisions to drop out was affected by both internal and external factors. This section will first focus on what factors at-risk students at Franklin Park High School explain as impacting their decision to drop out or graduate from school. Next, this section will address factors that other stakeholders see as impacting at-risk students’ decisions to drop out or remain in school. Finally, this section will compare the perspectives of students and faculty related to student decision making and the dropout phenomenon.

**Student perspectives**

The three at-risk students who chose to drop out of high school prior to graduation presented several common factors that contributed to their decision to drop out. These factors included no goal or focus to complete high school, negative peer relationships, course failures, attendance issues, and a lack of a sustained connection to the school community. Allison was
not feeling particularly engaged or challenged by high school, she saw little value in receiving a high school diploma, failed courses, felt few connections to the school or peers, faced financial difficulties that served as a barrier to her participation in extracurricular activities, experienced negative relationships with faculty members, and felt the school schedule detracted from her successful academic performance. Alana also did not see the importance of high school graduation as a goal, experienced several negative peer relationships and was connected to a “bad crowd”, struggled with suspensions and school rules, displayed little interest in school, struggled with attendance and frequently skipped school, failed several courses, and faced considerable challenges at home as she dealt with her parents volatile divorce. Sharon showed little interest in school and was not focused on graduating from high school, cited negative peer relationships and an abusive relationship as significant contributing factors, experienced no sustained connections to the school through participation in sports or extracurricular activities, faced difficulties with school rules and attendance and was suspended several times, and faced challenges at home based on a difficult relationship with her mother during her high school experience.

It is important to note that all three students who dropped out of high school were able to quickly and easily earn their GEDs. These students were capable of completing high school level work, but they were not committed to the goal of graduating from high school and were not connected to the school and often were able to clearly articulate why they did not like Franklin Park High School. These at-risk students all continue to struggle with issues related to unemployment or underemployment after high school, but each has shown the ability to successfully complete post-graduate or college level coursework. Each student remains optimistic about their future and has plans, goals, and aspirations. These students were capable
of graduating from high school, but they were not committed to the goal of graduation or the
process to complete that goal.

The three at-risk students who chose to graduate cited several common factors that
contributed to their success; these included a focus on the goal to graduate, a commitment to
reach that goal, support from the special education department, and positive relationships with
faculty members. Shane highlighted the importance of focusing on the goal of high school
graduation for his future generally and for future potential employment; his experience in small
group classes and the alternative program; support he received from guidance counselors,
assistant principals, the principal, and the alternative classroom teacher; and credit recovery
programs. Sonny also focused on the importance of graduating; the support he received from
peers, teachers, guidance counselors, and administrators; and support he received from the
special education department. Patty also was determined to graduate and saw it as an important
goal. She also benefited from special education support through the alternative classroom,
positive relationships with faculty and administrators, the social workers who provided support
in her transition back to the high school after a hospitalization, and support from her parents. All
three of the at-risk students who graduated were able to state that they saw high school
graduation as a clear goal, they were willing to complete all of the requirements necessary for
completion of the goal of high school graduation, and they were all able to access or receive
support to help them achieve the goal and meet all of the requirements of high school graduation.

The six at-risk students also had several common experiences during their high school
careers. Each student was able to articulate why they did not enjoy their high school experience.
All of the students were able to discuss both positive and negative experiences with faculty
members that they encountered during their high school careers. None of the students enjoyed a
sustained connection to a club or sport. Alana and Sharon both were cheer leaders, but eventually quit before their junior year. Shane and Patty developed a connection to the alternative classroom and were anchored by the program and the staff. All of the students struggled academically in their courses at some point in their high school careers, failed to attend school regularly and skipped school or classes, and were suspended and often broke school rules. The key difference between the at-risk students and that graduated and those that dropped out was a goal orientation, a focus on achieving the goal of high school graduation, and supportive staff that helped the students to complete the requirements to meet the goal of high school graduation.

**Administrator and Faculty Perspectives**

Administrators and faculty identified sixteen factors that impacted at-risk student decision making related to dropping out of high school. These included lack of success in the freshman year, organizational factors inherent to Franklin Park High School, curriculum, school rules and expectations, attendance, student retention in prior grades, suspensions, economic factors, home support, peer relationships, drugs and alcohol, lack of school success throughout a student’s school history, mental health issues, unrealistic future expectations, negative relationships with faculty members, and lack of connections to the school community. The faculty, school administration, and district administration identified areas that they had control over and those areas that they had little or no control over. Faculty believed the school could impact student success in the freshman year through programming related to the freshman transition program, credit recovery programs, and building relationships with students. Organizational factors can be influenced by faculty and administration through policies and actions that contribute to an inclusive and positive school culture. These policies and the school
culture can potentially positively impact development and follow through of school rules and expectations, attendance, student retention, suspensions, and connections to the school community and faculty.

Areas where the stakeholders identified that they had little or no impact was economic factors, home support, peer relationships, drugs and alcohol, and mental health issues. Clearly, schools can have some impact in these areas, but there is less of a potential for schools or school personnel to change the home environments and supports of students or to influence who they choose as friends or choices that they make in relationship to drugs, alcohol, and smoking. Schools can provide education and support in these areas, but they are less directly involved than in other areas to provide a positive and direct influence.

Stakeholders identified eleven areas that impact students’ decisions to choose to remain in school and graduate. These areas include a focus on goal setting and educational plans after high school completion, a culture of high faculty expectations, student growth and development, positive peer and faculty connections, positive impact of administrators, family support, special education, guidance department, student support program, credit recovery program, freshman transition program, and extracurricular sports and activities. These factors break into the three broad categories of interventions, relationships, and culture. The interventions identified by the faculty were also identified by the at-risk students who graduated. Programs such as the alternative classroom, credit recovery programs, and the student transition program were all mentioned by students either directly or indirectly. Each student mentioned positive relationships with the faculty and administration and how that contributed to supporting their goal of high school graduation. The school culture was repeatedly mentioned by the faculty and the at-risk students discussed how this contributed to their completion of high school.
Comparison of perspectives

The faculty and at-risk students had similar views on why students drop out of Franklin Park High School. Both students and faculty saw the importance of peer relationships, home and family issues, faculty and school relationships, school rules and student discipline, attendance, and goals. Some responses crossed categories. For example, the faculty was concerned about curricular relevance, but students did not mention the curriculum directly. This curriculum issue emerged in student responses related to their engagement or connection to school or how they viewed classes or school. Students did not think broadly about the curriculum, but were more focused on how they performed in individual classes, subjects, or their relationships with particular teachers. The weight or importance the faculty or students put on a particular factor also varied depending on the topic or factor.

A number of factors outside the school impact an at-risk student such as family, friends, court involvement, drug and alcohol abuse, and poverty. Faculty members interviewed for this study were able to cite examples from their experiences at the high school working with students. Each faculty member was able to articulate several obstacles students faced outside of school. Each of the at-risk students could also point to several examples of friends or influences that were external to the school setting that impacted their decisions related to dropping out of school or persevering and graduating. Many factors overlapped and combined factors that were influenced both by the school environment and externally. These factors included peer relationships, home and family issues, school rules and expectations, attendance, and interventions.
Peer relationships. Both faculty and students discussed the importance of peer relationships as a factor impacting student decisions to remain in school or graduate. Students placed a greater emphasis on the importance of peer relationships than the faculty did as a factor related to their decision making process. Faculty saw the importance of peers and their influence, but they did not emphasize it nearly to the level that the students did. Each of the students who dropped out discussed the significance of these relationships and their impact on their decision-making process. Alana discussed her relationships with older students and how that contributed to her engaging in risky behaviors and pulling her focus away from school. Sharon discussed two specific relationships that pulled her away from school that included an abusive relationship with a boyfriend and her best friend who dropped out of school and provided her with someone to hang around with when she skipped school or left early. Allison discussed how she felt socially isolated and many of her friends from middle school were involved in drugs and alcohol. Although she did not engage in these risky behaviors it clearly affected her social experience in high school and contributed to her feelings of isolation. All three at-risk students who graduated also discussed how negative peer relationships impacted them during high school. Patty transferred from a district that her mother resided in to a district that her father resided in because of how her negative social activities impacted her school performance. She continued to struggle with peers at Franklin Park High School. Shane was able to discuss in detail several friends of his who dropped out.

Faculty noted the importance of peer relationships and the “party culture” as a factor impacting some at-risk students, but they did not place the same importance on it as the students themselves. This could be related to the age and maturity of the students and how they view the importance of these relationships or because the students view these relationships as critically
important it may be a factor of considerable importance. The students spoke at length in their interviews about the peer relationships they had in high school and how those relationships affected their decision-making process. Each of the students could cite several examples of how negative peer relationships served as a factor that pushed them away from school success and contributed to poor attendance, behavior, and academic performance. Despite the acknowledgement of choosing their peer relationships, these negative relationships contributed to their ultimate decisions to either drop out or remain in school. The variable of peer relationships, though difficult to quantify, can be an important one in contributing to an at-risk student’s decision making process. The question for schools is how can they provide support or appropriate interventions in a meaningful way related to peer relationships and their impact on a student’s decision to drop out or remain in school.

**Home and family issues.** Both students and faculty agreed on the importance of home and family issues. Faculty members discussed how issues related to poverty, physical or mental abuse, substance abuse, or neglect can literally cripple a student’s ability to focus and achieve effectively in the classroom. Students discussed some of their home struggles. Alana talked about how her parent’s divorce affected her school performance and how the lack of supervision impacted her social choices. This is an area that both groups agreed upon, but the faculty seemed to place a significantly greater emphasis. Alana was the only student who emphasized the impact of her parents as a key factor in her dropping out of school. The faculty’s perception could be attributed to the much greater sample size of students with family issues that the faculty experienced over long careers. The faculty in each group was able to cite multiple examples of students who had tremendous academic promise but were unable to graduate from school because they could not overcome home or family issues. Three of the six students reported that
family issues had an impact, but again only Alana saw this as a significant factor. Faculty viewed this as a key component that impacted student performance and completion of high school. This is another area where the size of the student sample and the qualitative approach could limit the generalizations of the findings.

**School rules and expectations.** Each student talked about their struggles with school rules over the course of their high school experience. Students struggled with conflicts with other students, insubordination, smoking, cell phones, attendance and tardiness, and following directions. Faculty talked about how suspending students could alienate and isolate them from the school community. Students talked about suspensions in terms of losing class time and potentially losing class credits. The faculty also discussed the importance of the alternative program for students who were unable to manage themselves in the general high school program and how the alternative program has helped several students meet all of their academic requirements and graduate. Although this is a small sample, two of the students interviewed for this study participated in the alternative program and were able to graduate. The alternative program was not an option for two of the three students who dropped out because they attended Franklin Park High School before the program was implemented. None of the three students who dropped out would have fit the profile of a student for the alternative program so this may not have been a factor. It will be interesting to analyze how the alternative program impacts student retention rates over a period of time. None of the student interviewed for this program saw their disciplinary struggles as the main reason that they left school, but each student struggled with various behaviors early in their high school careers. The faculty did not see behavior as a key factor for students dropping out, but they did view it as an indicator that a student was at risk for not completing high school.
**Attendance.** Attendance was an issue that came up repeatedly for each of the at-risk students. Attendance is one of the key indicators of student at-risk behaviors and obviously if students are not attending school they will have a difficult time learning and ultimately graduating. Students and faculty had different views on this. Students stated they did not attend because they either did not like school or saw little value in attending school; faculty saw attendance as a symptom of a broader problem of being at-risk of not graduating from school.

Franklin Park High School and the district as whole has a number of systems in place to address attendance that includes communication with the home, student support teams, guidance counselors, attendance officer, monthly administrative attendance review boards, and second chance opportunities for students who struggle with attendance. Despite this litany of supports and interventions roughly 5% of the student population at Franklin Park High School in any given year exceed attendance limits to earn credits for classes. Clearly some students have legitimate health or family issues that prevent them from attending, but many of the students are similar to those interviewed for this study that are struggling with school and are choosing not to attend.

**Interventions.** Broad interventions at the state or national level are less likely to impact at-risk student outcomes than targeted and repeated interventions at the district and school level (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008). Even local, targeted interventions may only have a limited or moderate impact on the decision making process of at-risk students to drop out or remain in school (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008). Franklin Park High School has implemented a number of programs, supports, and interventions such as the New Start Program and summer school, the guidance office and its related services, the recent addition of a school psychologist, individual faculty and administrator efforts to reach
out to at-risk students, student support program and development of a Response to Intervention program, attendance outreach, extracurricular sports and activities, freshman transition program, partnerships with police and district attorney, special education interventions, and partnerships with other community organizations. Additionally, the school is critically examining its curriculum and course offerings as they shift from the old Massachusetts State Curriculum Frameworks to the new Common Core Curriculum. This has caused departments, the school administration, and the central office administration to look at each content area’s course progression and each courses scope and sequence. All of these programs, supports, and interventions matter and can make a difference for at-risk students.

Interventions are important and they can have an impact, but interventions alone are not enough to move an at-risk student toward graduation. Both the at-risk students and faculty interviewed for this study cited several programs or interventions that help at-risk students graduate. The faculty was able to discuss multiple examples of how programs or interventions supported student success. One teacher stated, “The New Start program got so many students on track to graduate. Many students only had to benefit from the program once to realize that they could just as easily of completed the work during the regular class experience.” An administrator talked about a student who would come to her office every morning to complete homework and projects:

John came every day at 6:30 am and he worked on homework, studied, and completed projects. Some days I would help him a lot; other days he would do it on his own. The important thing is that he had a quiet place where he could get some help to get his work done for school.
These are just two example out of many provided by the Franklin Park High School faculty. Two of the students interviewed for this study specifically credited the alternative program for supporting them through graduation. The third at-risk student, Sonny, pointed to a combination of faculty support, small group special education instruction, and services provided by the guidance office for helping him graduate. Interventions matter and support makes a difference for many students. They are worthwhile and even a small or moderate impact can have an influence.

It is important to understand that dropping out is not an isolated act, but a process that occurs over a period of time (Rumberger, 2011). This provides educators, families, and the community multiple opportunities to intervene. It is clear that effective and targeted interventions that connect students to either long or short term goals can make a difference. Interventions that are isolated from student goals are less likely to effectively influence a student toward graduation and away from dropping out of school. The more personalized the intervention is; the more likely it is to have a positive and direct impact on the student’s decision making process. This may be why the alternative classroom has such an influence. The program is individualized to meet each student’s needs and the supports encompass academic, emotional, behavioral, and social support. The Response to Intervention program and the Student Support Team have similar potential at individualizing interventions to meet student needs.

**Relationship of the Findings to the Theoretical Frameworks**

Goal theory and organizational theory comprised the theoretical framework from which this study was designed and examined. Goals theory can be used effectively to look at the goals of an at-risk student related to graduation. Goals and a goal orientation are clearly important when examining the decision making process of an at-risk student. Organizational theory is a
useful lens because it looks at the drop out issue through the culture, structures, and functioning of a school and school district. The school organization can either positively or negatively impact student experiences. These lenses are interconnected because the goals of students and schools as related to graduation are often the same. The individual and the organization intersect during the school experience and affect student attitudes, experiences, and outcomes. There is clear value for both the individual and the institution related to graduation.

**Goal theory.** Goals and resiliency are important. Knesting and Waldron determined that three key pieces must work in concert for student success that included a goal orientation, a willingness to “play the game”, and “meaningful” connections to adult members of the high school community (2006). If you look at each of the six students interviewed for this study through this lens the conclusions of Knesting and Waldron’s research is confirmed. Shane clearly had a goal to graduate from high school; was not able to play the game early on during his high school career but turned this around during his third year of high school; and he was able to list a number of faculty members who were invested in his success. Shane was able to graduate in five years and although he faced many difficulties he persevered. Sharon did not have a clear goal to graduate from high school; was not willing to attend consistently or engage in her classes; but she did have several positive faculty connections. Sharon dropped out prior to graduation, but she only met one of the three conditions. Allison was not committed to graduation as a goal; had a difficult time conforming to school rules and expectations; but she did have several meaningful connections to faculty members. Allison dropped out prior to graduation. Alana did not place a high priority on graduation; was not willing to play the high school game; but again she had several real connections to faculty. Alana dropped out as soon as she turned sixteen. Patty was focused on graduation; had a difficult time following school
expectations and rules, but was willing to meet those expectations; and made several positive faculty connections. Patty graduated in four years after transferring to Franklin Park High School. Sonny was determined to graduate; was willing to play the high school game; and made many positive connections to faculty. Sonny was able to graduate in four years. The importance of goals here is striking; each of the students who graduated was able to clearly articulate the importance of high school graduation to them. Faculty echoed the importance of a goal orientation and the ability to bounce back from adversity and persevere. The faculty was also able to see the evidence on the impact of positive relationships alone was mixed. One administrator stated, “Students needed to want to graduate and be willing to ask for and accept help.” Multiple factors contribute to the success or failure of an at-risk student related to graduation, but a goal and an orientation to complete the goal of high school graduation was critically valuable.

Choices and student goals are relevant. The three students who did not graduate made choices that led to poor attendance, poor academic performance, and consequences such as suspensions for behaviors that they engaged in throughout high school. Each of the at-risk students discussed the personal choices that they made during their high school career. All the students talked about how their own choices impacted whether they dropped out of school or graduated. Alana was very direct saying that “it is all you”; she clearly recognized that her goals and choices did not align with graduating from high school. Alana stated:

I skipped school. I hung out with losers. I was immature and I was in with the wrong crowd. I was surrounded by bad people. I hung out with senior guys when I was a freshman. They were into bad things. I got mixed up into the wrong crowd and had a negative experience because of myself and my choices.
Sharon also was able to articulate this as well:

I never saw school as my number one job. There were always other things that took my attention. If I could go to a party, I wouldn’t do homework. If I could talk on the phone with friends, I wouldn’t study. There were other things that I saw as more important than school.

These were conscious choices that Sharon made, and although graduating from high school is something that both Alana and Sharon would have liked to accomplish, it was not a clear goal that they were willing work at until the goal was accomplished. Conversely, the three students who graduated saw high school graduation as a clear goal and worked to achieve that goal.

Shane may have struggled with whether or not graduation was valuable early in his academic career, but he was able to improve his behavior and focus on academics to meet all of the requirements for graduation.

There was one clear difference between the at-risk students that graduated from high school and those at-risk students that did not, and that is each student who graduated clearly articulated that graduation was a goal and reasons why it was a goal for them. Sonny and Shane saw high school as a necessity for finding a job and success in the future. Goal theory ties into the research of Knesting and Waldron who see not only the importance of a clear goal for student success, but also the willingness to meet all expectations and requirements and have people supporting you (2006). Goal theorists agree that goals by themselves are not enough. Students need to want to succeed, they need to be willing to do the work or complete specific tasks to achieve that success, and they need support from individuals who can provide it. Goals need to be specific, the goal orientation and commitment of the individual setting the goal needs to be focused and strong, and the person setting the goal needs appropriate support to achieve the goal.
or meet the expectation (Seijts, Latham, Tasa, & Latham, 2004). Sonny, Shane, and Patty all had
the clear goal of graduating high school, after some initial struggles and setbacks they were all
willing to do the work and meet the expectations for a high school diploma, and each student was
able to directly point to several Franklin Park High School faculty members who helped them
along the way.

Goal setting is a key component of at-risk student success when looking at graduation
and attrition rates. Goal setting alone is not enough. Students need to be willing to commit to
completing the goal and must receive support and guidance when they struggle. There are a
significant number of variables and factors that can impact goal completion that are inherent in
the school community and external to the community. Both internal and external factors can
impact student goal completion. Many of these factors and variables have been discussed
previously. The goals theory lens is valuable because it looks at the goal itself, the goal setting
process, and the variables that impact the goals (Seijts, Latham, Tasa, & Latham, 2004). The
three students who chose to drop out of school did not have high school graduation as a primary
goal, but were able to meet other goals. For example, Alana was able to very quickly earn her
GED, enroll in college, and relocate to the West Coast. Alana was not motivated to achieve the
goal of high school graduation, but she was able to meet other goals that she prioritized and
demonstrated commitment to achieve the goals. The goals of at-risk students are important, the
commitment to meeting the goal is critical to attaining the goal, and schools and school
personnel can positively influence student goal attainment through support and encouragement.
Both the individual and the organization interact for the student to meet or not meet their
individual goals.

Organizational theory. Internal school or organizational factors are particularly important for
schools to examine critically because these are areas where changes in school policy can have more of a
direct and positive impact. Curricular relevancy was an issue that came up repeatedly in the faculty focus groups. Non-college bound students may not see relevancy of the curriculum or school culture. The curriculum is focused on college preparation because more than 85% of graduates on average attend colleges after high school. There is a clear expectation from the community as a whole on college enrollment after high school. High school graduation is not seen as an end goal, but as a means to continuing their education after high school. The school may want to look at curricular options for students who are not interested in attending college directly after high school. This could potentially involve more vocational training programs, further partnerships with the local community college or vocational technical school, or a more pronounced internship or apprentice program connected to job training and placement.

Additionally, teachers, administrators, and counselors focused on the importance of the freshman year as an indicator of future success in high school or a warning of a student being at-risk of dropping out of school. Students who struggle and fail courses or do not meet minimum attendance requirements “end in a hole” after their freshman or sophomore year and do not see graduation as a realistic option. Student retention in prior grades can also be an issue because students are no longer connected to their original peer group, may be into different things than their younger classmates, and academic gaps from past poor performance can impact current performance in more challenging high school level courses. Faculty also saw the school culture, schedule, disciplinary code, and academic expectations as internal factors under the school’s control. Franklin Park Public Schools should examine alternatives to retention in earlier grades such as summer academic programs or transition plans for students who struggle. The high school may also benefit from providing even more support to freshman, especially those freshman identified as special needs or low income. These students graduate at significantly lower rates their non-disabled or non-low income peers.
School structures, culture, or characteristics can impact at-risk student’s decision making processes. Franklin Park High School is structured to prepare students for a post-secondary college experience and is very successful in meeting that goal. Students who are not college oriented or college bound can struggle because fewer structures are in place to meet the needs of students who are more focused on entering the work force after high school. The school organization and culture supports high school graduation and enrollment in college. The goal for most students at Franklin Park High School is to complete high school and enroll in college. There is a significant amount of programming that meets the needs of those students. The expectation for students is to attend college after high school graduation. Students’ post-graduate plans in 2011 included 55% of students attending four year private or public colleges, 31% attending two year colleges, 3% percent going to work, and four percent entering the military (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Again there is less programming and fewer structures for those students who do not have college as a goal and are struggling with high school.

A large portion of each class does not enroll in the high school, but chooses to attend the local technical school. It is important to note that nearly one third of eighth graders apply to the local technical high school. A portion of students who are interested and would benefit from a technical or trade school education enroll at Franklin Park High School. Many of these students can struggle because the curriculum is not necessarily designed to meet their needs. The faculty is exploring several areas where the school and curriculum can support these students. Some ideas include specific programming and expansion of the internship programs. Those students are denied admission to the local technical school because they have already displayed negative patterns that identify them as at-risk based on middle school attendance, behavior, or academic
performance. This places these students at a double disadvantage because they already are demonstrating patterns that make them at-risk for not graduating and they are entering an institution that may not ultimately meet their educational needs.

School characteristics can also influence the success of students within schools. Two key school specific variables are the performance of students on standardized achievement tests and student retention rates (Christle, Jovilette, & Nelson, 2007). Students tend to perform at or above state averages on standardized tests and the student retention rates are low compared to state averages over the past five years (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Student discipline and how the school responds to behaviors is another indicator of organizational performance that can impact student retention rates (Christle, Jovilette, & Nelson, 2007). Franklin Park High School has higher suspension rates than surrounding districts with similar community profiles (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). The district as a whole is currently looking at discipline practices that may isolate students or alienate them from the school community. It will be interesting to see the results of this project and what impact it has on overall disciplinary processes, student retention, and what alternative disciplinary measures are developed. Poverty rates and student ethnic backgrounds can correlate to dropout rates; schools with higher poverty rates or a lower percentage of white students tend to have higher attrition rates (Christle, Jovilette, & Nelson, 2007). Franklin Park High School is predominantly white and has poverty rates that are significantly below state averages (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012). Students who identify with subgroups such as low income or special needs struggle to graduate at nearly the same or worse levels than their high risk counterparts in urban or rural communities. Post graduate plans of students are also an important
factor; schools that have a high percentage of students enrolling in college after graduation tend to have lower dropout rates and the opposite is also true (Christle, Jovilette, & Nelson, 2007). Franklin Park High School has a high percentage of students who report enrollment in college after graduation. The physical conditions of schools also matter; students tend to perform better in well maintained and clean buildings (Christle, Jovilette, & Nelson, 2007). Fortunately, the Franklin Park High School facility is relatively new and well maintained. The school structure and organization impact overall school performance and results. Franklin Park High School performs better than the state average in most categories and consequently the dropout rate for the community is relatively low. Still every student that leaves prior to graduation is something that should concern everyone in the school community, and students in high risk groups graduate at much lower rates than their peers.

**Relationship of the Findings to the Literature Review**

The findings of this study mirrored much of the conclusions found in the literature related to the dropout phenomenon. Students in low incidence dropout communities face similar challenges related to poverty, learning disabilities, and family issues. There are a number of factors that contribute to why a student drops out of high school including family income, parent’s educational attainment, learning or emotional disabilities, connection to the school or community, race, region within the country, and whether or not there is an invested adult in the student’s life (Katz, 1999; Garza, 2006; Greene, 2002; Pew Hispanic Center, 2005; Swanson; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009; U.S. Department of Education, 2002; Velez and Saenz, 2001). The at-risk students who drop out of Franklin Park High School make their decisions based on similar factors. Allison, Alana, and Sharon also struggled with similar factors that included no goal or focus to complete high school, negative peer relationships, course failures, attendance issues, and
a lack of a sustained connection to the school community. Franklin Park students who lived in poverty or were identified as requiring special education services graduate and drop out at roughly the same rates as their counterparts in urban school districts in Massachusetts. This was surprising because there are often more resources available in suburban schools, students have more successful peer role models, and there is often a higher educational attainment of adults in suburban communities compared to their rural and urban impoverished counterparts.

All of the at-risk students who were interviewed for this study displayed the behaviors identified in the literature that demonstrated a higher likelihood of not completing high school. All six at-risk students discussed their dislike of their high school experience, struggled academically in their courses at some point in their high school careers, failed to attend school regularly and skipped school or classes, could identify peers that were engaged in risky behaviors and who were also struggling in school, and were suspended and often broke school rules. This corresponds to the research that indicates at-risk students generally experience a lack of school engagement, absences, drug and alcohol use, pregnancy, or connections with friends who engage in illegal activities or have dropped out themselves (Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Faculty cited examples of Franklin Park students who left school early due to pregnancy. Similarly attendance, retention, and suspension rates impact student attrition and retention related to graduation (Jimerson, Anderson, & Whipple, 2002; National Center for Education Statistics, 1992). Where the findings of this study and the literature diverge is the impact family responsibilities have on a student’s decision to graduate or drop out. None of the students mentioned the need to work to support themselves or their family; faculty did not highlight family obligations as a key factor in the Franklin Park community for students leaving. This may be worth examining for a future study of low incidence dropout communities.
The experiences of the six at-risk students parallel the findings in the literature related to employment and economic outcomes. All six students were either unemployed or under-employed. The economic consequences of dropping out of high school are significant and impact long term economic prospects and the requirement for support from the government through various programs and subsidies (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morrison, 2006; Greene, 2002; Khatiwada, McLaughlin, & Sum, 2007; Tyler & Loftstrom, 2009). One study discussed that the difference between a high school dropout and a high school graduate’s earning potential could be greater than 30% over a lifetime (Swanson, 2009). The experiences of the at-risk students who dropped out and those that graduated in this study are nearly identical. This could be another area that may warrant further review. How do the long term economic prospects of dropouts from low incidence dropout communities compare to the long term economic prospects of dropouts from high incidence dropout communities? All of the at-risk students interviewed for this study were struggling with job prospects and had not completed any post-graduate training programs or earned either a two or four year college degree.

The literature related to interventions is mixed. Local, targeted interventions tend to be more successful than state or national programs or interventions (Dynarski, Clarke, Cobb, Finn, Rumberger, & Smink, 2008). All six students for this study had access to the same basic interventions and all six students accessed various interventions and supports. The three students who successfully graduated were also focused on the goal of graduating from high school and saw it as important and were able to accept help or access support to attain their goal of high school graduation. The three students who did not graduate were not committed to graduation as a goal and were not willing to meet all of the requirements for graduation. Interventions need to be connected to students who have a clear goal and the perseverance to attain the goal.
Connecting a student’s goal orientation to the necessary supports increases the efficacy of the interventions and the overall success of the student.

The literature consistently addresses the importance of a concerned adult in the life of a student (Katz, 1999; Garza, 2006; Hundley, Polanco, Wright-Castro, & Hershberg, 2003). Franklin Park faculty interviewed for this study also echoed and even broadly cited this research. All six at-risk students were able to point to positive relationships with faculty. Here is where the evidence becomes murky and even conflicting. The three students who were at-risk and graduated could clearly point to faculty members who supported them and were critical in helping them overcome any obstacles and graduate. Conversely, the three students who were at-risk and dropped out were also able to cite multiple positive relationships with faculty who attempted to help them throughout their high school career. The difference in how these faculty interventions impacted the different students could be more related to the individual student’s resilience and goal orientation related to high school graduation more than any positive or negative impact faculty interactions could potentially cause.

**Future Research**

This study presents several potential areas for future research and study. Two areas that are worth further examination are the impact on goal setting and positive faculty connections on the two high risk groups of students identified as low income and students with special needs. Does a focus on goal setting and providing significant support increase the likelihood of student’s graduating who are identified in the high risk groups of low income or students with disabilities. A second topic that is worth studying further is comparing the long term economic prospects of students from low incidence drop out communities who dropped out but were able to earn their GED with their peers in high incidence dropout communities. All three students
who were interviewed for this study were able to easily meet the requirements for the GED, but all three students are all currently struggling with employment. This could be the result of a slow recovering economy, the age of the former students, or something else may be at work. It could be interesting to examine a larger sample of students and determine if the long term economic prospects are different for students in low incidence communities compared to their counterparts in higher incidence urban or rural dropout communities. Does dropping out of school from a suburban community have any benefits and are there greater safety nets available for these students? Another area worth further study is the economic impact of family obligations on the decision making process of at-risk students in both low and high incidence dropout communities. Again, it may be valuable to see if there is a greater support for students from more affluent suburban communities compared to less affluent students from either rural or urban settings. No students for this study alluded to the need to earn money as a reason why they were dropping out of school. Another topic that could be worth further is study the impact on reading levels on graduation rates of high risk student populations. Three of the six students interviewed for this study were identified as receiving special education services. It is interesting to note that all three of those students graduated and the students who did not have an identified learning disability did not graduate.

**Implications for Practice**

The findings of this study and the literature indicate that at-risk students need three factors working together to be successful. These three factors are a commitment to the goal of high school graduation; the goal orientation, resilience, and perseverance to attain the goal; and support as the student moves toward goal completion. Schools need to focus on the variables in this equation that they can influence or control. Schools and faculties can have an immense
influence on students related to their academic performance, social experiences, and graduation rates. Each student interviewed for this study could identify several faculty members who positively impacted them during their high school experiences. The students who graduated also focused on graduation as a goal and were committed to attaining that goal. Graduation rates may improve if schools are able to encourage students to focus on graduation as a goal and provide programs and interventions that support students in meeting this goal.

Risk factors matter in low incidence drop out communities. Students who are identified as low income or requiring special education services are more likely to be at-risk for dropping out of school. Interventions and additional support may help these students persevere and graduate. There is a large discrepancy between the general student population and high need students. Developing programs that provide opportunities to set and meet goals, make key connections with faculty members, and provide support when needed to meet those goals could lead to better graduation rates for these high need populations. Additionally, focusing resources and interventions on students who have struggled during their freshman year could also improve those students’ graduation rates. There is certain to be some overlap between students identified in the low income or special needs subgroups and those students that struggle during their freshman year. These targeted interventions and support may lead to lower high school attrition and higher graduation rates. Again the students must share the goal of high school graduation with the institution that is supporting them toward that goal.

Schools can impact student retention and graduation rates by developing programs that support and sustain goal setting and goal completion. These programs can be embedded in guidance services, school curriculum, an advising program, or through some other vehicle based on school structures and cultures. The literature and the findings in this study support the
importance of goals related to high school graduation. In low incidence drop out communities, like Franklin Park, it may be important to provide additional resources and support for students who live in poverty or are identified as having special needs. These students are graduating at significantly lower rates than their peers and may benefit from additional support around goal setting and reaching the goal. This could include planning additional meetings with their guidance counselors; participation in programs that focus on goal setting, goal completion, study skills, and time management; and access to second chance credit recovery programs.

At-risk students also need support throughout their high school experience. Students who are identified as being at-risk may need a variety of supports to help them address academic, social, and emotional issues. This could include tutoring, counseling, or other services to meet a variety of needs. The risk factors and behaviors that lead to students dropping out are clear; it is important for schools and school personnel to identify these students, connect and engage them with the goal of graduating from high school, and supporting these students as they attempt to reach their goal. This raises several questions. How do schools develop a goal orientation related to high school graduation in students who are unmotivated or fail to see the value of a high school diploma? The three students interviewed for this study that dropped out were disinterested in earning their high school diploma and were slowly becoming disengaged from their educational experiences. These students received a great deal of positive attention and support from the Franklin Park faculty, but because they were not committed to the goal of high school graduation and meeting that goal, it led to these students eventually deciding to drop out of school. This is an important distinction; dropping out of school is a process that occurs over time and not a single event that is made on the spur of a moment. This means that there are many opportunities to intervene, but it also means that schools are often unable to effectively
take advantage of these opportunities and support all students toward the goal of graduation. The alternative program has experienced success; it may be possible to replicate some of the support and services for students who do need a small group experience all of the time, but they may need support around work completion, studying for tests and quizzes, and dealing with social or home issues.

Interventions are valuable and important, but to truly be effective students must be focused on the goal of high school graduation and willing to do the work to attain the goal. Each student interviewed for this study accessed multiple interventions and supports, but only the students focused on the goal of high school graduation and the attainment of that goal were supported by the interventions in a manner that led to completing high school. This suggests that the school has many processes in place that support students toward the goal of graduation. Students who were not focused on high school graduation or committed to completing the tasks related to the goal eventually chose to drop out of school. This underscores the importance of providing support to all students who are at-risk of dropping out because students may develop the goal of graduating from high school later in their career. Shane was an example of this. Early in his high school career he was not focused on graduating, but he eventually developed the goal of high school graduation and the persistence to meet the goal. All three students interviewed for this study at one point or another may have been at serious risk for not graduating, but these students showed resilience despite multiple obstacles and ultimately met their goal.

The problem with focusing on goals and resilience is that they are difficult to measure and determine who is committed to their goal and who is not. Again, this is why it is practical to provide supports to all at-risk students. The factors impacting their goals, resilience, attitudes,
and development can change over time. Providing an engaging, supportive school environment that supports student goal development and attainment will lead to greater graduation rates and fewer drop outs. This is relatively easy to state in a study, but it is much more difficult to consistently implement in practice due to the complexities of student’s experiences and the multitude of variables that impact those experiences. Additionally, schools should reach out to students who have left and offer programs that connect students back into the academic environment.

Conclusion

The dropout phenomenon continues to be an issue that confounds school personnel, policy makers, and researchers. In a time when skills and educational attainment are at a premium in the workforce, students still drop out of school an act that is not in their best economic interest. Most of these students are capable of completing high school level work, but choose not too for a variety of reasons. Schools have unprecedented access to data and tools to analyze that data. It should be relatively easy to identify students based on academic, attendance, behavioral data, or low income or special needs status. Identifying students and providing support is often not enough; students need to be focused on the importance of high school graduation and be willing to work to meet that goal. Despite understanding many of the factors that impact the decisions of at-risk students; a significant number of students across the country leave school early. In suburban school systems attrition rates are typically lower than their urban counterparts. All schools struggle with students from low income families and with students who receive special education services. Rural and urban schools tend to have a higher percentage of families living in poverty. The drop out percentages of students overall are higher in urban areas, but if you look at the Franklin Park High School example their high needs
students struggle at the same rates as similar students in urban districts in Massachusetts. Exploring this issue in a setting where there is a relatively low incidence of student attrition provided both reinforcement of the findings in the current literature and insights on how students perceive their choices and what influences them.

It is clear that student goals and resilience are important factors. All three of the at-risk students who graduated saw graduation as a goal, were resilient in meeting that goal, and received support from the Franklin Park faculty. The three at-risk students who did not graduate did not have as strong of a goal orientation related to high school graduation, did not work to overcome obstacles and meet expectations, but each of the students could point to several faculty members that helped them. All of the students had access to the same interventions and supports, but the students who articulated that high school graduation was a goal were able to persevere and meet that goal. Connections to an adult who cares about them are important, but each of the students who dropped out all could point to several significant connections that they made with faculty in the building and still dropped out.

This could lead to the conclusion that the three conditions outlined in Knesting’s and Waldron’s research result in positive outcomes for students. This was confirmed based on the small sample at Franklin Park High School that was interviewed for this study. How do school personnel help students develop meaningful goals and a goal orientation that will lead to goal completion? How do you build resilience in students so that they are able to overcome barriers and obstacles to their success related to high school graduation? Exploring how to build an effective process that connects students to the goal of high school graduation beginning in the freshman year could be valuable. Developing strategies or programing that helps students work through issues they are facing may be more complicated because students wrestle with obstacles
both internal and external to school. The challenge is how to measure a student’s seriousness about their goals and their level of resiliency and perseverance to meet those goals. This can be problematic when determining which students will benefit from a particular intervention and how to meaningfully set and support student goals.

This also echoes Rumberger’s assertions that interventions make a difference but the impact can be moderate to small. If someone is not interested in being helped or supported; the likelihood of an intervention being effective is small. It appears that interventions and supports are more valuable to students who have the clear goal of graduating high school and the goal orientation to overcome difficulties faced along the way. Each student in this study engaged in several interventions provided by the high school, but only half of the students interviewed were able to graduate. When looking at all at-risk students over the past five years attending Franklin Park High School nearly eighty percent of at-risk students were able to persevere and graduate. Interventions and supports matter, but they cannot work in a vacuum and students must be interested in leveraging programs and supports to meet their goals for high school graduation and the future. A student’s goals and the value they place on education and a high school degree are important. It is also important to have supports in place that help at-risk students meet their goal of high school graduation. These conditions need to work in concert for at-risk student success in high school.

The drop out phenomenon is a complex problem that requires multiple complex solutions. Students drop out for similar reasons regardless of the setting and can face similar obstacles. In suburban settings where a lower percentage of students live in poverty the challenges remain daunting and the results for students with high needs are similar to urban school graduation rates. Unfortunately, there is not one intervention that will magically help all
at-risk students persevere and graduate. A number of targeted interventions and supports may be necessary to assist students who are at-risk for dropping out of school, but interventions and programs alone are not enough. The students themselves must see a value in a high school diploma and a reason to engage the school setting to achieve that diploma. School needs to find ways to connect students to the goal of graduating from high school and the importance of meeting all of the requirements to reach that goal. This is where individual and institutional goals intersect. Schools and districts that can align student and school goals may increase the percentage of at-risk students that successfully graduate. That appears simple on its face, but it is a complex process with multiple variables. Students are impacted by factors inside and outside of school and although there are common challenges, each student’s struggles are their own. Creating school cultures that are focused on goal setting; support student attainment of their goals; and provide a variety of supports and interventions related to academics, behavior, and attendance could see a greater percentage of students graduating and fewer students dropping out. Educators, students, and families will continue to struggle with these issues, and as schools learn more about how students understand their own decision making processes they can become more effective in supporting students toward the goal of graduation.
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Appendix A: Participant Recruitment Forms

Student Recruitment Phone Script

Institution: Northeastern University, Doctor of Education Program

Name of Investigators: Kevin McIntyre and Sara Ewell

Title of Project: At-Risk Students and the Dropout Rate: What influences student decisions to remain in school or drop-out in a suburban high school?

Hello, my name is Kevin McIntyre and I am the Principal of the John F. Ryan Elementary School here in Tewksbury. I am also a doctoral candidate enrolled in the Northeastern University Doctor of Education Program. How are you today?

I received your contact information from the Tewksbury Public Schools. I am inviting you to take part in a research study that I am conducting as part of my dissertation work for Northeastern University. My research is looking at at-risk high school students and the drop-out rate. I am calling you because during your high school career you were identified as an at-risk student for dropping out of high school due to attendance, academic performance, or disciplinary issues. If you are interested in taking part in this study we will ask you to participate in an interview that will last between 30-60 minutes, allow researchers to review your high school records and file, and provide an opportunity to review the written analysis of your responses approximately one month after the conclusion of your interview. The interview and the follow-up can take place at a mutually convenient location (e.g. local library, café) or over the phone.

Participation in this study is voluntary and you can ask me questions at any point during this conversation. There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. Discussing your experiences in high school may bring up negative, difficult or painful memories. However, the information learned from this study may help educators develop and improve programs or
interventions that will provide support and assistance to students considering dropping out of school.

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you, the high school, school system or any individual in any way. You will be given a $20 gift certificate to a local restaurant for your participation in this research study. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study. Do you have any questions?

Would you be interested in participating in this study?
Dear Colleague,

As many of you know, I am the Principal of the John F. Ryan Elementary School here in Tewksbury. I am also a doctoral candidate enrolled in the Northeastern University Doctor of Education Program. I am inviting you to take part in a research study that I am conducting as part of my dissertation work for Northeastern University. Participation is completely voluntary. This email will tell you about the study, and if you are interested in voluntarily participating please respond to this email. You may ask the researcher any questions that you have about the study. We are asking you to participate in this study because during your educational career you have worked with students identified as at-risk for potentially dropping out of high school due to academic performance, attendance, or disciplinary referrals. We will be hosting two separate focus groups for educators. One group will be composed of teachers and counselors and the second group will consist of building level and district level administrators.

The purpose of this research is to understand the decision making process of at-risk students to drop out or remain in school until graduation. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a focus group that will last between 30-60 minutes. The focus group, which will be audio-taped for transcription and analysis purposes only, will take place at a Tewksbury school or the central administration office. There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the information learned from this study may help educators develop and improve programs or interventions that will provide support and assistance to students considering dropping out of school.

Your identity will be kept confidential. Your responses will be heard by other members of the focus group. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you.
reports or publications will use information that can identify you, the school, the school system or any individual in any way. In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

If you are interested in participating, please respond to this email. Again, your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to and your decision will have no effect on your standing at work. Please do not hesitate to contact me if you have any questions about the study. I appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

Kevin McIntyre
Appendix B: Consent Forms

Institution: Northeastern University, Doctor of Education Program

Investigators: Kevin McIntyre, Student Researcher and Sara Ewell, Principal Investigator

Title of Project: At-Risk Students and the Dropout Rate: What influences student decisions to remain in school or drop-out in a suburban high school?

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study

We are inviting you to take part in a research study. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher, if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

Why am I being asked to take part in this research study?

We are asking you to participate in this study because during your high school career you were identified as at-risk for potentially dropping out of high school due to academic performance, attendance, or disciplinary referrals. You must be at least 18 years old to participate in this study.

Why is this research study being done?

The purpose of this research is to understand the decision making process of at-risk students to drop out or remain in school until graduation.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in an interview and allow researchers to review your high school records and file. The interview will be audio-recorded for transcription and analysis purposes only. In addition, you will be asked to participate in a 15-30 minute review the written analysis of your responses approximately one month after the conclusion of your interview.
Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

The initial interview will last between 30-60 minutes and the follow-up review will last between 15-30 minutes. They will take place in a mutually convenient location (e.g. local library, café) or over the telephone.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

The possible risks or discomforts of the study are minimal. You may feel uncomfortable or upset discussing high school experiences. You can refuse to answer any question and the interview can be stopped at any time.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the information learned from this study may help educators develop and improve programs or interventions that will provide support and assistance to students considering dropping out of school.

Who will see the information about me?

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will see the information about you. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you, the school, the school system or any individual in any way. All audio recordings will be destroyed following transcription and analysis. In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. Even if you begin the study you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as a former student at the school.
**Will I be paid for my participation?**

You will be given a $20 gift certificate to a local restaurant for your participation in this research study.

**Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Kevin McIntyre at XXX-XXX-XXXX, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Sara Ewell, the Principal Investigator overseeing the research.

**Who can I contact about my rights as a participant?**

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University Boston, MA 02115 tel. 617-373-4588, email: [irb@neu.edu](mailto:irb@neu.edu). You may call anonymously if you wish.

**I agree to take part in this research.**

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<table>
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<tr>
<th>Signature of person who explained the study to the participant above and obtained consent</th>
<th>Date</th>
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<tbody>
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</table>
Institution: Northeastern University, Doctor of Education Program

Investigators: Kevin McIntyre, Student Researcher and Sara Ewell, Principal Investigator

Title of Project: At-Risk Students and the Dropout Rate: What influences student decisions to remain in school or drop-out in a suburban high school?

Request to Participate in Research

We are inviting you to take part in this research study. We are asking you to participate in this study because during your educational career you have worked with students identified as at-risk for potentially dropping out of high school due to academic performance, attendance, or disciplinary referrals.

The purpose of this research is to understand the decision making process of at-risk students to drop out or remain in school until graduation. If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask you to participate in a focus group that will last between 30-60 minutes. The focus group, which will be audio-taped for transcription and analysis purposes only, will take place after school in the school library or central administration office.

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to you for taking part in this study.

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in this study. However, the information learned from this study may help educators develop and improve programs or interventions that will provide support and assistance to students considering dropping out of school.

Your part in this study will be handled in a confidential manner. No reports or publications will use information that can identify you, the school, the school system or any individual in any way. All audio-recordings will be destroyed following transcription and analysis. In rare instances, authorized people may request to see research information about you and other people in this study. This is done only to be sure that the research is done properly. We would only
permit people who are authorized by organizations such as the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board to see this information.

**Your participation in this research is completely voluntary.** You do not have to participate if you do not want to and you can refuse to answer any question. Even if you begin the study you may quit at any time. If you do not participate or if you decide to quit, you will not lose any rights, benefits, or services that you would otherwise have as an employee at the school.

**You will not be paid for your participation in this study.**

If you have any questions about this study, please feel free to contact Kevin McIntyre at XXX-XXX-XXXX, the person mainly responsible for the research. You can also contact Dr. Sara Ewell, the Principal Investigator overseeing the research.

If you have any questions about your rights as a participant, you may contact Nan C. Regina, Director, Human Subject Research Protection, 960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University Boston, MA 02115 tel. 617-373-4588, email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

You may keep a copy of this form for own records. Thank you for your time.
Appendix C: Interview and Focus Group Questions

Interview Questions: At-Risk Student

1. Tell me about your high school experience?

2. Why do you think you dropped out or graduated from Franklin Park High School?

3. What interventions or programs were in place to prevent you from dropping out of school or helped you graduate? How effective were those programs?

4. What factors inside of school impacted your decision to drop out or remain in school?

5. What factors outside of school impacted your decision to drop out or remain in school?

6. How can teachers, counselors, or administrators positively impact student’s decision making process to remain in school and graduate?

7. What would you change to reduce the dropout rate in Franklin Park?

8. What are you doing now?
Focus Group Questions: Administrators

1. Why do you think students drop out of Franklin Park High School?

2. What interventions or programs are in place to prevent students from dropping out of school? How effective are those programs?

3. What factors inside of school impact whether a student decides to drop out or remain in school?

4. What factors outside of school impact whether a student decides to drop out or remain in school?

5. Why do you think nearly 80% of at-risk students are able to persevere and graduate?

6. How can administrators positively impact the at-risk student’s decision making process to remain in school and graduate?

7. What would you change to reduce the dropout rate in Franklin Park?
Focus Group Questions: Teachers and Counselors

1. Why do you think students drop out of Franklin Park High School?

2. What interventions or programs are in place to prevent students from dropping out of school? How effective are those programs?

3. What factors inside of school impact whether a student decides to drop out or remain in school?

4. What factors outside of school impact whether a student decides to drop out or remain in school?

5. Why do you think nearly 80% of at-risk students are able to persevere and graduate?

6. How can teachers or counselors positively impact the at-risk student’s decision making process to remain in school and graduate?

7. What would you change to reduce the dropout rate in Franklin Park?
Appendix D: District and State Level Drop Out Data

Franklin Park High School

Graduate Rate Percentages

4 year Graduation Rate

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<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>88.4%</td>
<td>85.8%</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
<td>87.2%</td>
<td>91.2%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>84.4%</td>
<td>83.1%</td>
<td>85.6%</td>
<td>85.4%</td>
<td>92.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>92.4%</td>
<td>88.1%</td>
<td>91.2%</td>
<td>88.8%</td>
<td>89.7%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special education</td>
<td>69.8%</td>
<td>61.8%</td>
<td>71.9%</td>
<td>65.6%</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>68.8%</td>
<td>66.7%</td>
<td>60.9%</td>
<td>69.2%</td>
<td>90.9%</td>
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(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)

Franklin Park High School

2011 Cohort 4 Year Graduation Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student group</th>
<th># in Cohort</th>
<th>% Graduated</th>
<th>% Still in School</th>
<th>% GED</th>
<th>% Dropped Out</th>
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<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
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<td>88.4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>122</td>
<td>84.4</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>9.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>119</td>
<td>92.4</td>
<td>1.7</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>5.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>69.8</td>
<td>7.0</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>18.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>68.8</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>21.9</td>
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</table>

(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)
Franklin Park High School

2010 Cohort 4 Year Graduation Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student group</th>
<th># in Cohort</th>
<th>% Graduated</th>
<th>% Still in School</th>
<th>% GED</th>
<th>% Dropped Out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>261</td>
<td>85.8</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>5.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>118</td>
<td>83.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>143</td>
<td>88.1</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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<tr>
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<td>34</td>
<td>61.8</td>
<td>17.6</td>
<td>5.9</td>
<td>14.7</td>
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<td>Low Income</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>66.7</td>
<td>12.5</td>
<td>8.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
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</table>

(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)

Franklin Park High School

2009 Cohort 4 Year Graduation Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student group</th>
<th># in Cohort</th>
<th>% Graduated</th>
<th>% Still in School</th>
<th>% GED</th>
<th>% Dropped Out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>303</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>2.0</td>
<td>4.3</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>132</td>
<td>85.6</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>7.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>171</td>
<td>91.2</td>
<td>0.6</td>
<td>5.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
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<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
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<td>71.9</td>
<td>9.4</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>12.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
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<td>60.9</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>4.3</td>
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(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)

Franklin Park High School

2008 Cohort 4 Year Graduation Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student group</th>
<th># in Cohort</th>
<th>% Graduated</th>
<th>% Still in School</th>
<th>% GED</th>
<th>% Dropped Out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
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<td>87.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>6.7</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>151</td>
<td>85.4</td>
<td>2.6</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>8.6</td>
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<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>161</td>
<td>88.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>5.0</td>
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<tr>
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<td>32</td>
<td>65.6</td>
<td>6.3</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>25.0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low Income</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>69.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>15.4</td>
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(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)
Franklin Park High School

2007 Cohort Graduation Rate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Student group</th>
<th># in Cohort</th>
<th>% Graduated</th>
<th>% Still in School</th>
<th>% GED</th>
<th>% Dropped Out</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>All Students</td>
<td>283</td>
<td>91.2%</td>
<td>3.9%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>138</td>
<td>92.8%</td>
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<td>2.9%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
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<td>Female</td>
<td>145</td>
<td>89.7%</td>
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<td>Special Education</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>58.3%</td>
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<td>Low Income</td>
<td>11</td>
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(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)

State Dropout Trends 2006-07 to 2010-11

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<th>08-09</th>
<th>09-10</th>
<th>10-11</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Total HS Enrollment</td>
<td>298,033</td>
<td>295,937</td>
<td>292,372</td>
<td>290,502</td>
<td>289,161</td>
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<td>Number of Dropouts</td>
<td>11,436</td>
<td>9,959</td>
<td>8,585</td>
<td>8,296</td>
<td>7,894</td>
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<tr>
<td>Dropout Rate</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
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<td>2.9%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
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(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)

Annual Dropout Rates for Special Populations 2006-07 to 2010-11

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<th>08-09</th>
<th>09-10</th>
<th>10-11</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Special Education</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>4.6%</td>
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<tr>
<td>General Education</td>
<td>3.5%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
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<tr>
<td>LEP</td>
<td>10.4%</td>
<td>8.8%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>8.5%</td>
<td>7.9%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-LEP</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>2.7%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>2.5%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Low-Income</td>
<td>5.8%</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td>5.0%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
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<tr>
<td>Non-Low-Income</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>2.1%</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
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(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)
### Annual Dropout Rates by School Type 2006-07 to 2010-11

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<th>09-10</th>
<th>10-11</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Regular/Comprehensive</td>
<td>3.7%</td>
<td>3.1%</td>
<td>3.0%</td>
<td>2.9%</td>
<td>2.8%</td>
</tr>
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<td>Academic Schools</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocational/Technical</td>
<td>2.6%</td>
<td>2.2%</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>1.8%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Charter Schools</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td>7.7%</td>
<td>3.8%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>4.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools located in cities</td>
<td>5.7%</td>
<td>5.3%</td>
<td>4.8%</td>
<td>4.7%</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Schools located in towns</td>
<td>1.9%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.4%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
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(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)
Appendix E: Plans of Franklin Park High School Graduates

Plans of Franklin Park High School Graduates

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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>4-Year Private College</td>
<td>28%</td>
<td>25%</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>30%</td>
<td>32%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4-Year Public College</td>
<td>27%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>40%</td>
<td>34%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-Year Private College</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2-Year Public College</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>15%</td>
<td>20%</td>
<td>14%</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other Post-Secondary</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Work</td>
<td>3%</td>
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<td>10%</td>
<td>8%</td>
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(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)
Appendix F: Franklin Park High School Enrollment and Attendance Indicators

Franklin Park High School

2010-2011

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<thead>
<tr>
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<th>District</th>
<th>State</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9-12 Dropout Rate</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Rate</td>
<td>95.9</td>
<td>94.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average # of Days Absent</td>
<td>7.1</td>
<td>9.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-School Suspension Rate</td>
<td>0.2</td>
<td>3.5</td>
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<tr>
<td>Out-of-School Suspension Rate</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>5.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention Rate</td>
<td>0.5</td>
<td>2.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unexcused Absences &gt;9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.5</td>
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(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)

Franklin Park High School

2009-2010

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District</th>
<th>State</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9-12 Dropout Rate</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Rate</td>
<td>95.7</td>
<td>94.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average # of Days Absent</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-School Suspension Rate</td>
<td>0.1</td>
<td>3.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-School Suspension Rate</td>
<td>5.0</td>
<td>6.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention Rate</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>2.1</td>
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<tr>
<td>Unexcused Absences &gt;9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
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(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)
### Franklin Park High School

#### 2008-2009

<table>
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<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9-12 Dropout Rate</td>
<td>1.3</td>
<td>2.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Rate</td>
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<tr>
<td>Average # of Days Absent</td>
<td>7.6</td>
<td>9.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-School Suspension Rate</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>3.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-School Suspension Rate</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention Rate</td>
<td>0.8</td>
<td>2.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unexcused Absences &gt;9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
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(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)

### Franklin Park High School

#### 2007-2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>District</th>
<th>State</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Grade 9-12 Dropout Rate</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>3.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Attendance Rate</td>
<td>95.8</td>
<td>94.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average # of Days Absent</td>
<td>7.3</td>
<td>9.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-School Suspension Rate</td>
<td>0.3</td>
<td>3.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Out-of-School Suspension Rate</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>6.2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retention Rate</td>
<td>0.7</td>
<td>2.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Unexcused Absences &gt;9</td>
<td>0.0</td>
<td>2.2</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, 2012)