IMPROVING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE in the NEW BEDFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS

A dissertation presented

by

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ABSTRACT OF DISSERTATION

Regular school attendance is a key contributor toward student success. Lack of attendance by its very nature removes the student from time on learning that is essential for academic success (Estridge, 2009). The reality is an absence, whether it is excused or not, means that a child is not in benefiting from educational opportunities on that day. Smith (2011) stresses that school districts have to work in the community and with families to promote public awareness and understanding of the problem, build high expectations and develop a culture of daily school attendance and educational attainment.

In instances when absenteeism becomes chronic, a myriad of student and family issues are usually involved, and a dysfunctional relationship between the student and school often exists (Rothman, 2001). Student disengagement from school has for more than a decade been reflected in the attendance, dropout and achievement (MCAS) data of the New Bedford Public Schools. New Bedford High School has one of the highest dropout rates in the Commonwealth of Massachusetts and has not met the requirements for the Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for the attendance measure in more than ten years.
The purpose of this study was to give students, parents, teachers and administrators a voice to explain their perceptions and experiences to help explain the New Bedford Public Schools’ chronic absenteeism, and their vision and ideas of how to correct it. The goal of this researcher was to conduct a case study of the New Bedford Public Schools’ capacity to meet the needs of at-risk students and determine best practices for improving school attendance in order to ultimately reduce the number of dropouts in the district. It was through an exploration and utilization of the experiences and insight of students, staff, and parents that led to the development and expansion of the New Bedford Public School’s Where Are YOU Headed? school attendance and graduation initiative.

Key Terms: School attendance, truancy, absenteeism, student absence, dropout, graduation, educational attainment, at-risk students, student engagement, student motivation, school climate, school organization, school climate

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Earning a doctoral degree has been a monumental undertaking - one that could not have been completed without the support, encouragement and assistance of many people. This journey has helped me to realize just how truly blessed I am with the wonderful people in my life.

First, this study would not have been possible without the love, support and motivation from my parents. My understanding of the importance of daily school attendance is the result of my father’s unwavering high expectations, especially on the long awaited “Senior Skip Day” in 1987 when he personally chauffeured me to the front door of Fairhaven High School.

I am indebted to the students, staff, and administrators of the New Bedford Public Schools. It was only through their cooperation and involvement that this study and the development of the Where Are YOU Headed? school attendance and graduation initiative has been possible. Go New Bedford Whalers!

I would like to thank Dr. Angela Bermudez for her continued guidance, support and positive attitude throughout the dissertation process. And a most gracious thank you to my committee members, Dr. Claire Jackson and Dr. Alan Stoskopf for picking up where Angela left off and seeing me through to the end.

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I could not have done this without the constant support from “the other side of my brain,” Sue Anne Marks. It was her relentless tactics that encouraged me and kept me going even when my motivation waxed and waned.
DEDICATION

This doctoral study is dedicated to my family—my husband Peter and our sons, Myles and Mason. You are all truly my biggest fans and I love you all very, very much. Thank you for pushing me when I needed to be pushed, assisting me when I could not find my words, encouraging me when I needed to hear that I could do this, giving me space when I needed take a nap, making me laugh when I wanted to cry, and always being by my side.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

During the whaling era New Bedford, Massachusetts was known as the richest city in the world. As the economic fortunes of the city have risen and fallen, with the loss of textile manufacturing and restrictions placed on the fishing industry, New Bedford has struggled to regain her lost prominence and to build a promising future. Years of economic hardship in New Bedford have produced lingering social problems that are pervasive and difficult to overcome, including high rates of unemployment, welfare dependency, increased homelessness, low expectations for educational achievement, as well as high rates of dropouts, substance abuse, domestic violence and other violent crimes.

The City of New Bedford is the 4th largest city in Massachusetts with a population of 93,768. According to the census (2000), the city has the second highest unemployment rate in the state and the lowest median household income in the state. People living at 200% below the poverty level are double the state average. The city also suffers from a low educational attainment with more than 50% of the population failing to complete high school and only 10.7% of adults earning college degrees (Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2002).

An array of research exists establishing the fact that students in urban schools often face significantly greater challenges than others in pursuit of their high school diploma (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2009; Attendance Works, 2011). To a certain extent these challenges are defined by socioeconomic and family factors as well as the conditions within the neighborhoods in which these urban students live (Lambert, 2009). Yet, other important factors related to obstacles to high school graduation are due to school-level causes which include poor
school climate, poor school attendance and a feeling of school disconnectedness through a lack of positive and meaningful student-teacher relationships (Howard & Johnson, 2000). In instances when absenteeism becomes chronic, a dysfunctional relationship between the student and school may be indicated, suggesting that schools need to be more student-centered and supportive of those with unique needs (Rothman, 2001). Epstein and Sheldon (2002) stated “the research that has been conducted on student absenteeism suggests that it may be as important as any issue confronting schools today” (p.308).

New Bedford is not isolated in its concern for the future of its youth and their decisions to not attend school and not reach their high school graduation. Dropping out of school is a nationwide epidemic. Truancy is a venue for disaster that leads to academic failure, dropping out of school, limited career options, and the inability for young people to earn a living to sustain themselves and their families (Davidson, 2008). In an increasingly competitive global economy, the consequences of dropping out of high school are devastating to individuals, communities. Dropping out not only has an impact on the quality of life of the student, it also affects the local and national economy (Dufour, 1983; Laird, Lew, Debell & Chapman, 2001; Levin, Belfield, Muennig, Rouse, 2007). According to Hickman, Bartholomew, Mathwig & Heinrich (2008), “The nation would save approximately 45 billion dollars if it could cut the number of dropouts in half.” At the absolute minimum, adults need a high school diploma if they are to have any reasonable opportunities to earn a living wage. Most businesses, as well as the military, are reporting they need workers with technical skills that require at least a high school diploma. These trends are dire and more devastating for at-risk children and based on the city’s demographics give a bleak forecast for the students of New Bedford.
Despite the morass of problems, there exists in this city a strong resolve on the part of the school district leadership, human services, mental health organizations, law enforcement, and other professionals to work in collaboration to help all citizens to rise above these circumstances and take their place as productive members of the New Bedford community. With such resolve and community partnerships, the school leadership is attempting to improve educational outcomes for all children. In so doing, the administration has focused on the dual goals of improvement in school attendance at all levels and a reduction of the high school dropout rate.

**Purpose of the Study**

This practice-based research study is one component of a multi-dimensional effort to address the high school dropout crisis in New Bedford, Massachusetts. The overarching goal of this research was to conduct a case study of the New Bedford Public Schools that would improve the district’s ability to meet the needs of at-risk students and determine best practices for improving school attendance in order to reduce the number of dropouts in the district.

**Research Questions**

The two overall questions of this case study are: (1) How do different participants in the NBPS system explain the chronic absenteeism of students, and their own role in improving student attendance? and (2) Why do at-risk students in New Bedford choose to be absent from school and what do they believe would motivate them to attend school regularly?

**Statement of the Problem**

*New Bedford’s Dropout Crisis*

There is a dropout crisis in New Bedford, Massachusetts; with 8.4% (or approximately 250 students) leaving school without a diploma every year. According to the Massachusetts
Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE), the annual dropout rate is calculated by dividing the number of students who drop out over a one-year period by the October 1 grade 9-12 enrollment, multiplied by 100. "Dropouts" are defined as students who leave school between July 1 and June 30 of a given year and do not return, graduate, or receive a GED by the following October 1st (Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (MA DESE), 2011).

This dropout crisis is fueled by the fact that hundreds of children do not attend school in New Bedford each day. As poor school attendance or truancy is a major predictor of school failure, it may also be one of the best predictors in determining students who are at risk for dropping out of school. In fact, Sheldon and Epstein (2004) claim dropping out of school for...
many students is “merely the culminating act of a long withdrawal process from school, forecast by absenteeism in the early grades” (p. 308).

What is both amazing and unacceptable is that with the plethora of information that has been gathered regarding the fact that poor school attendance leads to high dropout rates, the epidemic in New Bedford has been stagnant for years. Research suggests that this may be because schools often blame their poor attendance rates on individual students who are chronically absent, rather than consider what they may or may not be doing to cause the problem (Corville-Smith, 1995; Fallis & Opotow, 2003). Dropout prevention programming in New Bedford appears disorganized because no real improvements in the data have been shown. Furthermore, the district has lacked an individualized student approach, integration of services and a shared vision and goals, as it relates to dropout prevention and recovery. Services for disconnected and chronically absent students or students at risk for dropping out have focused on “fixing” the students that schools consider deviant by initiating involvement with the juvenile court system. Moreover, many dropout prevention programs often serve students who would not have dropped out, and do not serve students who would have dropped out (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002; Baker, Sigmon & Nugent, 2001). In the New Bedford Public Schools, many of these supports are often offered as after-school programs or focused on MCAS remediation and academic support; and do not meet the needs of students who are not attending school at all.

**New Bedford’s Attendance Crisis**

New Bedford High School has not met the 92% requirement for the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB’s) Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) attendance measure in more than ten years. Some may claim that the New Bedford Public Schools has a much tougher job than the small suburban districts with 2000+ less students at the high school level. Our
neighboring districts do not deal with the crime, violence, gang-related activity, and lack of parental involvement that the NBPS must handle every day. Each and every one of these issues plays a role in why many of our students do not come to school.

During the 2009-2010 school year, the New Bedford Public Schools (NBPS) enrolled a diverse population of 12,609 students. Minority students represent close to half of the student body, 70% are considered low income, more than 70% are eligible for free or reduced lunch, 19% are students with documented disabilities, and a quarter of the students do not claim English as their first language. The annual high school attendance rate for the 2009-2010 school year was 85.2%, which indicates approximately 300 students are absent from New Bedford High School every day (New Bedford Public Schools (DESE) District Report Card, 2009).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>School Year</th>
<th>New Bedford High School</th>
<th>New Bedford Public Schools</th>
<th>Massachusetts</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009-2010</td>
<td>85.2%</td>
<td>92.2%</td>
<td>94.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2008-2009</td>
<td>86%</td>
<td>92.5%</td>
<td>94.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2007-2008</td>
<td>87.2%</td>
<td>92.8%</td>
<td>94.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2006-2007</td>
<td>87.4%</td>
<td>93%</td>
<td>94.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2005-2006</td>
<td>88.3%</td>
<td>93.2%</td>
<td>94.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2004-2005</td>
<td>90.1%</td>
<td>93.7%</td>
<td>94.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2003-2004</td>
<td>87.4%</td>
<td>92.5%</td>
<td>94.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2002-2003</td>
<td>85.8%</td>
<td>91.3%</td>
<td>93.9%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Figure 2: Attendance percentage rates comparing New Bedford High School, New Bedford Public Schools and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts for school years 2002-2010. Data provide by the MADESE School report card data at [www.doe.mass.edu](http://www.doe.mass.edu).
Significance

State and federal mandates, such as those for Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) for attendance rates, can force districts to choose between high attendance rates or low dropout rates. At New Bedford High School (NBHS) the question arises daily whether to maintain the enrollment of a student who displays a wide variety of needs and who has missed 15+ days of school, or to “drop them” for non-attendance, to preserve positive reporting statistics to the state. This practice often results in the school district and/or school administrators appearing to “push kids out” of high school and/or being “drop out factories.” Mulvany (1989) explains that particularly in large urban high schools, absenteeism has become acceptable for a particular proportion of students. Although procedures dealing with absenteeism are clearly specified, school staff sometimes respond in an ad hoc way, doing what they believe is right in a certain situation, doing what time allows them to do, or in response to whether they believe the student “deserves” another chance. Students under the age of sixteen may have a chance of receiving support or interventions from outside community agencies, however there are few supports for a student over the age of sixteen who stops coming to school. If a student has a large number of conduct cards for poor behavior and criminal charges, in addition to poor attendance, they may be referred to one of the district’s alternative schools, which is often their only chance at graduating from high school because of the smaller setting that is designed to address the multiple needs of at-risk students.

In New Bedford’s elementary and middle schools, because the 92% AYP expectation is exceeded, school attendance is not considered a priority issue and therefore is not investigated until a student has been absent more than fifteen consecutive days. The majority of elementary aged children have not made the decision to drop out of school, although they are forming bad
habits and not receiving the needed support and encouragement to attend every day. At the middle school level, students’ poor attendance habits tend to become more apparent as the peer pressure to skip school increases and parental control can start to decrease.

**Theoretical Framework**

For purposes of this doctoral project the researcher looked at the issues of school attendance and dropout prevention through the lenses of motivation and organization. The majority of studies regarding organizations and motivation focus on how it pertains to increasing satisfaction in the workplace (Steinberg, Brown, and Darnbusch, 1996), with few studies implicating motivational factors as contributing to a student’s decision to attend school. However, these theories provided a clear lens for: 1) inquiring into why students do not attend school, 2) determining what kinds of motivation would improve school attendance for at-risk youth, 3) reviewing and restructuring the roles and responsibilities of staff in the New Bedford Public Schools, and 4) developing a comprehensive and integrated approach to meeting the needs of at-risk youth in order to effectively address daily school attendance and ensure that students reach their high school graduation. Furthermore, by applying these theories, it allowed the researcher to ask deep questions from various participants and at very different levels. For example, the researcher was able to establish probable reasons why some at-risk students attend school while others do not. Digging into the district’s policies, procedures, organizational structure, staff expectations, etc. provided insight into the overall climate and culture of the school and how it factors into poor attendance.

**Motivation Theory**

Motivation theory is a multifaceted theoretical strand that is concerned with the processes that describe why and how human behavior is activated and directed. According to Baron and
Greenberg (2008), "Although motivation is a broad and complex concept, scientists have agreed the definition of motivation as the set of processes that arouse, direct, and maintain human behavior toward attaining some goal" (p. 248). Applying motivational concerns to school attendance and dropout prevention allows researchers to ask questions about why some students persist to high school graduation despite their risk factors, while others give up (Reid, 1982; Schlechty, 1994; Ryan & Deci, 2009). Motivation theory and related constructs such as attribution theory shed light on a student’s persistence to attend and graduate from high school and can be used to explore a student’s individual life journey.

Attribution theory is probably the most influential contemporary theory with implications for academic motivation (Weiner, 1992). This cognitive theory of motivation is based on the belief that human beings make rational, conscious decisions. Graham (1997) explains how attribution theory is concerned with individual’s perceptions or interpretations of why things occur. These explanations or causal attributions are an important part of understanding motivation and can create self-fulfilling prophecies that can either help or hinder performance (Buchman & Seligman, 1995).

Attribution theory also emphasizes the idea that learners are strongly motivated by being able to feel good about themselves. It also incorporates cognitive theory and self-efficacy theory as it stresses that students’ self-perceptions will strongly influence the ways in which they interpret their success or failure. Explanations of attribution theory are an important part of understanding motivation and can help schools understand how students can create self-fulfilling prophecies that can help improve their school performance (Buchman & Seligman, 1995). In general, when learners succeed at an academic task, they are likely to attribute this success to their own efforts or abilities; but when they fail, they will want to attribute their failure to factors
over which they have no control, such as bad teaching or an unwelcoming school. According to these authors, “If we want students to persist at academic tasks, we should help them establish a sincere belief that they are competent and that occasional imperfections or failures are the result of some other factor (such as not attending school daily or a lack of sufficient effort) that need not be present on future occasions” (Buchman & Seligman, 1995). If this is true for at-risk students in New Bedford, it is extremely important for teachers and staff to help them develop the conviction that they can still succeed if they attend school and give it their best effort. Researchers refer to this as having an internal locus of control (Weiner, 1992). Therefore, improving school level factors is not quite enough to change the negative trajectory of at-risk students. It is still vital however for students to develop an internal sense and an understanding of the connection between their attending school daily and earning their high school diploma. Utilizing this theory allowed this researcher to gather information related to both sides of the issue: motivated/engaged and unmotivated/disengaged.

Through the exploration of Abraham Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs with the student and parent participants, the researcher gained a clearer understanding of the competing needs of our highest risk students and is now better able to share information and ideas to staff regarding a more comprehensive approach to educating them. Abraham Maslow (1943) introduced five levels of basic human needs in his hierarchy of needs: physiological, safety and security, love, self-esteem, and self-actualization. Maslow's theory argues that individuals are motivated to satisfy a number of different kinds of needs, some of which are more powerful than others. He stresses that until these most pressing needs are satisfied, other needs have little effect on an individual's behavior. “As one need becomes satisfied and therefore less important to us; other needs loom up and become motivators of our behavior” (Maslow, 1943, p. 382). This theory is
especially relevant for the 29.5% of New Bedford’s children who live in poverty (compared to 12% statewide). The research shows that poor children are more likely than children from middle and upper-income families to experience poor health, emotional and behavioral problems, grade retention, low educational attainment, teenage pregnancy and violent crime (Alexander, Entwistle, & Horsey, 1997; Balfanz, 2007; Englund, Egeland & Collins, 2002). The continued cycle of poverty and low educational attainment in New Bedford suggests our youth are hopeless and unmotivated because their basic needs are not met by society nor their schools. Maslow (1943) explains self-actualization as “the desire for self-fulfillment... the desire to become more and everything one is capable of becoming” (p.374). However, reaching such a place and becoming a driver of action for school engagement assumes all of the previous needs in the hierarchy are satisfied (e.g., safety and self-esteem). Today’s school staff must understand that it may be the time a child spends in their classroom that could be the key to providing them with their only source of security, love and self-esteem; and therefore expand their ability to meet the needs of the “whole child.” By exploring student perceptions of school climate and relationships between students and staff, the researcher uncovered relevant information regarding the concept of engagement with a goal of self-actualization.

**Organization Theory**

Improving an organization to meet challenges posed by its mission and stakeholders can be a daunting task. Organizational theory is the study of internal designs, structures, and relationships with the external environment, and the behavior of leaders and staff within the organization (Nirenberg, 1978). It suggests ways in which an organization can plan for and adjust to change (Schein, 1985). The application of the tenets of organizational theory to the NBPS facilitated an analysis of the district’s goals, school environments, staff roles and
responsibilities and stakeholders as they relate to the dropout crisis. Bolman and Deal (2003) offer a comprehensive approach for looking at situations from various angles in order to get results and create needed change within an organization. For example, organizations may focus on staff relationships, policy and procedure, the concentration of power within the structure, social aspects, or the interactions between staff (Washor & Mojkowski, 2006).

Wehlage’s (1991) article contains the only published research that has approached the problem of dropping out from a school organizational perspective (Bryk & Thum, 1989, p.355). They found that typically little attention is given by schools in regards to how school operations might contribute to a student’s decision to drop out of school. Unfortunately, their investigation was limited in some significant ways. Bryk and Thum (1989) explain that the school variables considered in their research were individual student reports about their attitudes regarding school and their behavior inside and outside of school. According to the authors, “It is well known that student-level analyses can be highly misleading in research on school effects” (p.355).

One of the most overlooked school factors that contributes to the dropout problem is the schools’ organizational structure, climate and quality of the relationship between teachers and students, especially at-risk students (Davis and Dupper, 2004; Christenson & Thurlow, 2004). Although educators are increasingly aware that influences such as family and students’ social networks are significant to student engagement and achievement in school, even more critically involved are classroom curriculum and school organization (Steinberg, et.al., 1996). Newmann (1991) suggests that developments in school organization over the past 25 years, such as large school size, increasing specialization of staff, and diversification of the curriculum, have contributed to a heightening of student alienation. In turn, Dynarski & Gleason (2002) identified
small class sizes, more personalized setting and individualized learning plans as characteristics that lowered dropout rates in alternative programs.

It is unacceptable when we have information identifying students who are at risk for dropping out of school as early as kindergarten; and the organization or district "watches" them struggle year after year until they simply stop attending school. To some extent all of the city's stakeholders are aware of the crisis and many "employ" dropout prevention programs and strategies. However, there is a lack of culture in the New Bedford Public Schools that expects teachers, staff, parents and community partners to engage in collaborative problem solving and integration of interventions at all levels for at-risk students. Too many programs operate as individual silos, rather than part of a timely and coordinated dropout prevention and recovery effort. These internal and external organizational deficits, as well as a lack of comprehensive city-wide ownership and problem solving makes it too easy for students to drop out; and continues to fuel what may be described as the district's dropout-production crisis. Empirical evidence reports that absenteeism is less prevalent in schools where staff are interested in and engaged with students and where there is an emphasis on academics (Pellerin, 2000). An orderly social environment is another important condition. In addition to a committed faculty, students are more likely to attend school and to persist to graduation in schools where the adult authority is perceived by students to be fair and effective (Wright, 1978; Bryk & Thum, 1989).

Summary

At the American Youth Policy Forum in 2006, the message shared with youth, educators and other professionals was that students who drop out of school will face an increased likelihood of being incarcerated, living in poverty and abusing drugs. Three years later a similar message was shared. On August 4, 2009, Arne Duncan (United States Secretary of Education),
stated at the national Safe & Drug Free Schools conference, "Today's dropouts are destined for two things: a life of unemployment and poverty." Clearly as evidenced by national, state and local data, attempts to improve attendance rates and reduce the number of students who drop out have not been bold enough or deep enough to make systemic change.

Studies of dropouts show patterns of non-attending behavior indicating that these students may begin distancing themselves from school at an early age (Lamdin, 1996). According to Epstein and Sheldon (2002), "school characteristics and practices can influence rates of absenteeism among students" (p.309). More attention needs to be given to the influence of schools, and more specifically teachers, administrators and other staff have on a student's decision to not attend school. Knesting and Waldron (2006) believes we must look beyond the limited scope of individual student characteristics and broaden the focus to include school factors in understanding how to prevent students from dropping out of school.

By involving students, staff, parents and community partners in this exploratory study, the researcher unlocked some unknown factors about the reasons why so many students in New Bedford are chronically absent from school. The NBPS administration had never conducted a study to investigate the district's chronic absenteeism, nor have they asked at-risk students for their insight and ideas to inform needed change. Findings from this study help bridge the gap between known causal factors related to chronic absenteeism with several new discoveries that can help advance educators' understanding of and response to chronically absent students. Additionally, learning more about what motivates at-risk students to come to school has lead to refined strategic interventions based on real experiences. The findings and recommendations from this study are of great interest to the educational and community leaders in New Bedford;
as well as other urban school districts because the consequences of poor attendance pose a threat to our youth, our community, and have an enormous financial impact on school districts.

For purposes of this project, the researcher used organizational and motivation theories to explain why and how schools must change the ways in which we educate and support our youth. Ideas for improving school attendance rates through improving school climate, fostering positive relationships, working collaboratively and expanding alternative pathways for learning were examined. Furthermore, the theories were utilized to understand and develop plans to break the cycle of poor school attendance. Chronic absenteeism was investigated from individual, familial, and staff viewpoints with an emphasis on examining existing beliefs about responsibility of non-attending behavior.
Chapter 2

Review of the Literature

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to give at-risk students, parents, teachers and administrators a voice to explain their perceptions and experiences to help explain the New Bedford Public Schools' record of chronic absenteeism, and their vision and ideas of how to correct it. A review and discussion of existing literature on the topics of dropouts and absenteeism helped to locate the themes and constructs of this study within the larger academic field. First, an overview of the history of compulsory school attendance laws and current policy and procedures outlined by state and local attendance law and regulations was used to frame a discussion of the evolution of thinking and actions related to addressing poor school attendance. Next, there was a review of the research on the relationship between chronic absenteeism and dropping out of school. Further explanation of how truancy can be viewed as both a contributing factor and a predictor of dropouts will be provided. Finally, this was followed by a review of the research on the factors that play into the phenomenon, as well as the attention the research has given to the perspectives and insight of students, parents and school staff related to poor school attendance.

Compulsory School Attendance Law

More than 150 years have passed since Horace Mann helped Massachusetts establish a statewide system of education that eventually led to the requirement that all children attend public school (Good, 1956). In 1852, Massachusetts became the first state to pass compulsory school attendance laws, and by 1918, all states required children to receive an education. Good (1956) explains the earliest explanation of the term compulsory attendance refers to state
legislative mandates for attendance in public schools by children within certain age ranges for specific periods of time within the year. Components of compulsory attendance laws include admission and exit ages, length of the school year, enrollment requirements, alternatives, waivers and exemptions, enforcement, and truancy provisions (Gee & Sperry, 1978).

In 1852 the Commonwealth of Massachusetts passed the first law to require student attendance in schools. The Massachusetts School Attendance Act of 1852 specified that children between the ages of eight and fourteen had to attend school for twelve weeks per year, six of which had to be consecutive if the school remained open for that time (Gee & Sperry, 1978). By 1900 court cases had affirmed state enforcement of compulsory attendance laws based on the benefit to the child and the welfare and safety of the state and community. The finding stated that "the welfare of the child and the best interests of society require that the state shall exert its sovereign authority to secure to the child the opportunity to acquire an education" (Hudgins & Vacca, 1979, p. 275).

The history of school attendance law shows the country’s first attempts of reducing absenteeism. Many school districts, including New Bedford, have attacked the problem of absenteeism by enacting laws that impose penalties on the truants and/or their parents, because little has changed in regards to the wording of the law for school attendance (Massachusetts General Law (MGL) Chapter 76 Section 1). As a result, school districts often recruit the assistance of law enforcement officials to assist with a problem that requires much more than a day in court. While the intent may be to provide proactive efforts to deter children from the truant-to-criminal evolution, the truth is that school truancy is often many youth’s introduction
into the court system. The law cannot be the only intervention to enforce that children attend school.

**Efforts to Improve Education in the United States**

Beginning with the 1983 publication of *A Nation At Risk* by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, America’s educational system has been criticized and described as mediocre. However, in this landmark publication that spearheaded a national effort to reform education, the focus was not on dropouts but rather on the need for stricter standards, higher student performance and the establishment of minimum competency (Boyer, 1983; Roderick, 1993). It was not until Howe and Edelman (1985) of the National Coalition of Advocates for Children, declared “the rising number of school dropouts is the single most dramatic indicator for the degree to which schools are failing children” (p. xi) that the needs of at-risk students were considered. This report sparked a flurry of action across the nation. In 1987, under the sponsorship of the United States Department of Education’s Office of Educational Research and Improvement, the Urban Superintendent’s Network issued a report entitled, “Dealing with Dropouts: The Urban Superintendent’s Call to Action.” This report outlined a variety of strategies to reduce dropouts in urban school districts and resulted in virtually every major school system in the nation to instituting programs and policies to reduce dropouts (Roderick, 1993).

Now in 2011, the dropout rate remains a national educational crisis and millions of children across the country are absent from school each day. Previous research has provided a detailed picture of the risk factors that distinguish dropouts from graduates (Roderick, 1993). So, it is no longer surprising when a student drops out of school, especially if he or she has done
poorly in school, has been retained, and has a history of poor attendance and behavior (Alexander, et.al., 1997). The question remains, "What have we learned?"

**Attendance Issues and No Child Left Behind**

Although the research suggests the scope of attendance problems is difficult to measure and the data is limited, schools know when they have a school attendance problem and they know which students have an attendance problem. Historically, the accuracy and use of school-based attendance data has been an issue because school districts were not previously held accountable for attendance rates. The No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) of 2001 changed that. School districts are now mandated to submit attendance data by school, grade, and subgroups (special education, low income, English Language Learners, etc). Clearly, the NCLB data reporting measure was a positive and much needed move by the government. However it is ineffective in several ways. States are allowed to define their own formulas for calculating truancy rates so there is no consistency to compare states. The National Center for School Engagement’s (2010) concern regards the possibility that by requiring attendance data, district may create an incentive for some schools to push out students who have attendance problems, rather than try to re-engage them and risk continued absences.

NCLB also requires states to set academic performance goals based on standardized test scores and graduation rates. Test score accountability has received much more attention and has been enforced with greater expectation than graduation rate accountability (National Center for Student Engagement, 2010). School administrators are keenly aware that a school is better off if low-performing students drop out (including most severely truant students) than if they take a standardized test and reduce the school’s chances of earning Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP)
(Losen, 2008). If a school continually does not meet the requirements of AYP, the school and therefore the district, can be deemed "underperforming." A status of underperforming can easily affect an administrator’s reputation and even employment status.

An emphasis on academic standards has pushed schools and teachers to focus their efforts on improving student achievement, thus creating a major dilemma for schools. This forces administrators to decide if the school should target the students who do not attend, or focus their efforts on the students who do attend and can help raise the school’s scores? Such a tailored focus on improving test scores thus inhibits a school’s ability to focus on the multitude of student and family needs that may explain why are students not attending school (Carolan, Natriello, and Rennick, 2003).

**Attendance Issues in School Policy**

The most common responses to teenage chronic absence around the country are punitive, contrary to what adolescent development and school engagement research tell us about what motivates teens to go to school (VERA Institute of Justice, 2010, p.1). Typically enforcement of compulsory attendance laws is attempted through local school attendance officers, law enforcement officers, and juvenile courts. Furthermore, there were no studies found that discussed positive reinforcements or incentives for attendance for students at the secondary level.

In many high schools, administrators subscribe to strict policies and align attendance with grades and course credit. Some student handbooks outline to students and parents they will be denied credit for assignments on days of an unexcused absence, not allow work to be made up,
or not be issued credit for a course if the student has a certain number of days absent. Other schools align school attendance with discipline codes and issue sanctions such as detention, Saturday school and even suspension (Gullatt & Lemoine, 1997; New Bedford High School Student Handbook, 2010). Ken Duckworth (1988) discusses both academic and administrative penalties used to deter students from both whole day truancy and selective class cutting. Duckworth (1988) concluded that "in general, academic penalties are effective only with students who are concerned about their academic records and a basic problem with all penalties is that they use aversion to force students to participate in school. They do not build positive motivation and the coerced attendee becomes the classroom teacher's discipline problem" (p. 3). This concept illustrates the need for this study to uncover existing policies and procedures within the NBPS that inadvertently increases chronic student absenteeism.

**Relationship Between Absenteeism and Dropouts**

At the heart of education is school attendance, a premise so widely taken for granted that it is rarely discussed. The fact is students must be present and engaged in order to learn (Chang, Hedy & Romero, 2008). Some believe the expectation should be that all students should want to attend school, and others expect adolescents at least understand the value of a high school education (Roderick, 1993; Lamdin, 1996; Wright, 1978; Whitney, 2008). What has become apparent through this study is neither is always the case.

Each day in the United States 2.7 million students are absent from school (Harper, 2005), and every 9-11 seconds a student drops out (Lehr, Sinclair & Christenson, 2004; Children's Defense Fund, 2009). Researchers of high school dropouts have discussed who drops out, why they drop out and the consequences associated with dropping out (Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Pellerin, 2000). The research consistently shows chronic absenteeism and dropping out of
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school are very complex and intertwined behaviors and the root causes are varied and can include a variety of personal and family-related reasons (U.S. Department of Education, 2008).

Studies have shown however, there is a clear connection between poor school attendance and dropping out of school. They have also shown how the relationship is circular, rather than linear (Alexander, et. al., 1997; Balfanz, 2007; Smink & Reimen, 2009). That is, chronic absenteeism can be both a predictor and the result of the many behaviors related to dropping out (Finn, 1989; Epstein & Sheldon, 2002; Davis & Dupper, 2004; Davidson, 2008). This concept clearly lends to the complexity of this phenomenon. However, research on school dropouts has been limited in its ability to examine the relationship between school experiences, poor attendance, and eventually dropping out of school (Finn, 1989, p.18), because it is not typical for school districts to maintain historical data indicating causal relationships between risk factors for individual students.

**Extent of the School Attendance Crisis in the Research**

Although poor school attendance is frequently mentioned in articles related to improving school climate and decreasing the dropout rate, there appears to be a gap in the existing research with the focal intervention being to improve school attendance rates. Despite a long history of concern over school attendance, the issue has received relatively little attention from educational researchers if not connected to the issue of dropouts (Corville-Smith, 1995). Researchers have focused more attention on the issue of students who drop out of school than on issues such as the low rates of daily student attendance. It is surprising that little extant research exists which focuses on what schools have done and can do to increase and sustain students’ daily school attendance, when Epstein and Sheldon (2002) state, “the research that has been conducted on
student absenteeism suggests that it may be as important as any issue confronting schools today (p.308).

**Factors Contributing to Poor School Attendance**

A number of studies have sought to determine the root causes of dropout behavior and have all arrived at the same conclusion: there is no single cause. Historically, researchers have considered understanding student deficits as the first step toward preventing school dropouts (Knesting & Waldron, 2006, p.599). According to a study prepared by Achieve, Inc. in 2006, there is a voluminous body of research that has shown that factors related to student's social and family background can increase or decrease the risk of dropping out. These easily identified risk factors include: poverty, mental health issues, multiple schools, single parent homes, court involvement, foster care history, parent dropout history, and low educational expectations by parents. Furthermore, studies have shown that certain racial/ethnic groups are at higher risk for dropping out of school. Time Magazine's article, *Dropout Nation* (2006), estimated that nearly 1 out of 3 public high school students won't graduate in the United States. They further predicted that for Latinos and African Americans, the dropout rate was approaching an alarming 50%. However, the research has also documented that while demographic factors are important, they do not tell the whole story. School districts need to look closely at each student's educational experiences (including attendance) if they are to begin to address drop out issues.

**Societal Factors Associated with Absenteeism**

The majority of studies on student absenteeism attribute its causes to macro-societal influences such as socio-economic status, family dysfunction, family attitudes toward education,
and parental standards of behavior (Brodbelt, 1985; Finn, 1989; Reid, 1999). It is clear these larger issues can easily shape an individual’s perspective of school, motivation to attend school, and ability to attend in school. According to 2008-2009 Student Information Management System (SIMS) data, New Bedford educates a multitude of children with individual and family factors that may interfere with school attendance. For example, 541 NBPS students and family members were homeless at some point during the school year. The NBPS also educates some 280+ youth who are living in foster care. Foster children, like homeless children, may average 2-6 placement changes in a school year and are at much higher risk for dropping out of school due to the education they have “lost.” These students are expected to come to school “ready to learn” despite the trauma of abuse, abandonment, loss, hunger, substance abuse, and/or mental health illness. They do not possess the skills to resolve conflict, handle their anger, or manage their impulses. Poor social and emotional development contributes to a higher incidence of disruptive classroom behavior, which in turn interferes with learning. The needs of children in public schools continue to grow in severity and schools are being called on to provide therapeutic and social services in addition to teaching math and reading.

The Kids Count Census data (2000) as well as The Massachusetts Department of Public Health (2002) further describes the struggles the residents of New Bedford face:

- **Child Abuse and Neglect:** New Bedford has the tenth highest abuse reporting rate in the state.
- **Parental Drug Abuse:** Parental substance abuse factors into more than 60% of New Bedford’s child abuse cases.
- **Parental Absence:** 41.4% of the city’s children live in single-parent households, compared to 22.8% statewide.
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- **Low Parental Educational Attainment**: According to the 2000 Census, 42.4% of New Bedford adults lack a high school credential, almost three times higher than the statewide average of 15.2%.

- **Economic Disadvantage**: 29.5% of New Bedford’s children under 18 live in poverty, compared to 12% statewide.

- **Violence**: In 2009, New Bedford had a reported 1,184 violent crime incidents, including 9 murders. This is 179.69% higher than the violent crime rate for Massachusetts.

- **Teen Pregnancy**: New Bedford’s teen pregnancy rate is double the statewide average.

**Individual Factors Associated with Absenteeism**

The link between social disadvantages and absenteeism has been established in the literature (Brodbelt, 1985; Dei & Holmes, 1995; Reid, 1999). In fact, Reid’s research found that most truants endure a considerable degree of social deprivation in their everyday lives, which often compounds their educational disadvantages (1999, p.33). According to Reid (1999), it is often difficult for teachers and administrators who have been raised with middle class social values and lifestyles to appreciate the full meaning and extent of the deprivation of some of their pupils and how it can easily affect their behavior and academic achievement and desire to attend school (p.33).

The factors that cause a student to not attend school are diverse and complex. As such, there is no single program or project that will resolve this chronic problem. Yet, schools and educators have a greater capacity to intervene on school level factors. The Silent Epidemic: Perspectives of High School Dropouts, a report by Bridgeland, Dilulio and Morison (2006), revealed that when students have been asked the reason for leaving school, they frequently cite
reasons such as a lack of connection to the school setting, that school is boring, feeling unmotivated, academic challenges and the weight of real world events. In turn, a study by Knesting and Waldron (2006) examined how at-risk students persist in school and gave consideration to all of the individual and societal factors that are commonly associated with dropouts. They argued that the existence of such external factors do not mean that schools cannot have an impact on a student’s decision to stay in or drop out of school. Furthermore, studies suggest student engagement in the school environment, as well as within the classroom and a strong student-teacher relationship can be a student’s vaccination against dropping out of school.

**School Level Factors Associated with Absenteeism**

Although individual student factors and societal factors are important, there is a need to look beyond this limited scope to include the influence of school factors in understanding how to improve student attendance and decrease dropouts. Rogers and Frieberg (1994) stated, “Our educational system is failing to meet the real needs of society. Our schools constitute the most traditional, rigid, bureaucratic institution of our time. It is the institution that is most resistant to change” (p.xxi). In recent years an emerging body of research suggests that the school system’s structure continues to be influential in generating absenteeism and other forms of student rebellion (Bahr, 1999; Soloman 2002; Balfanz, 2007; Henry, 2007). Corville-Smith (1995) research suggests that schools often blame their poor attendance rates on individual students who are chronically absent, rather than consider what they may or may not be doing to cause the problem. Bennett and LeCompte (1990) discussed the general assumption by school personnel that neither they nor the system should be implicated in student failure or chronic absenteeism. The authors continue by stating “schools often express to students that reasons for failure lie in
their own lack of motivation or poor choices in order to remove the blame on the failure of the institution’s ability or willingness to meet the needs of the students (Bennett & LeCompte, 1990, p.179). This may be in part because past research has focused primarily on why students leave school and not on how to help them stay, and little is known about how to support student persistence in school (Christensen, Sinclair, Lehr, & Godber, 2001; Corville-Smith, Ryan, Adams, & Dalicandro, 1998).

In instances when absenteeism becomes chronic, a dysfunctional relationship between the student and school may be indicated, suggesting that schools need to be more student-centered and supportive of those with unique needs (Rothman, 2001). According to Davis and Dupper (2004), “Rather than working with students to change inappropriate behaviors, schools are systematically excluding students at near epidemic rates” (p.182). Englund, Egeland, and Collins (2008) added:

Teacher-child relationship factors predict high school graduation or dropping out: students who have positive relationships with their teachers; feel motivated and supported by their teachers; perceive their teachers as caring, encouraging, and responsive; and receive guidance and assistance from their teachers are less likely to drop out of high school (p.80).

It is difficult for anyone to argue that it is not an educator’s job to create an engaging climate and work with students who are struggling.

Christenson and Thurlow (2004) captured the essence of the dropout crisis in their article titled, School Dropouts: Prevention Considerations, Interventions, and Challenges. These authors stated, “Although students who are at greatest risk for dropping out of school can be
identified, they disengage from school and drop out for a variety of reasons for which there is no common solution (p. 36). They further describe dropping out as a process of disengagement from school, not an instantaneous decision (p.37). The unfortunate reality across America is that dropping out of school is too easy for too many students. Although it is well documented that students are more likely to be engaged and motivated to attend school every day when 1) they have positive relationships with school personnel, 2) a welcoming school climate exists, 3) school-based supports and resources are available, and 4) they feel safe and cared for (Smink & Reimen, 2009), too many students in large urban high schools report this is not their experiences (Bridgeland, Dilulio & Balfanz, 2009). Thomas Armstrong (2006) supported this need of a supportive classroom environment when he stated, if schools continue to focus the conversation on rigor and accountability and ignore more human elements of education, many students may miss out on opportunities to discover the richness of individual exploration that schools can foster (p.182). He suggested further research must be conducted on whole child interventions and programs that have proven successful in poor urban districts.

**Importance of School Attendance**

There is a large body of evidence suggesting a student’s school performance is directly linked to school attendance (Finn, 1987; Alexander, et.al., 1997; Bridgeland, et.al., 2006). Attendance is important because students are more likely to succeed in academics when they attend school consistently. Early absences hamper a child’s ability to read and exacerbate achievement gaps, especially for poor children and minorities who typically have higher rates of absenteeism (Attendance Works, 2011, p.1). In addition to falling behind in academics, students who are not in school on a regular basis are more likely to get into trouble with the law
and cause problems in their communities (Christenson & Thurlow, 2004; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Englund, Egeland & Collins, 2008).

A study conducted by Hickman (2008) of the Rodel Community Scholars at Arizona State University tracked students from kindergarten through high school and found that dropout patterns were linked with poor attendance, beginning in kindergarten. Hickman, director of the Rodel Community Scholars Program notes they discovered that as early as kindergarten, behavioral differences are apparent between those who go on to graduate and those who drop out, with dropouts missing an average of 124 days by eighth grade. Numerous other authors have also conducted longitudinal studies which consistently show students who eventually drop out of school are absent more often than other students beginning as early as first grade (Alexander, Entwistle and Horsey, 1997; Barrington and Hendricks, 1989; Rumberger, 1987; as cited in Epstein and Sheldon, 2002, p.308).

Consequences of Poor School Attendance

Dropping out of school not only negatively impacts the individual but society as a whole. Because dropouts are less likely to work as young adults and over the course of their lives, unemployment rates will continue to increase. Additionally, dropouts make up the majority of jail and prison populations. A 2005 Massachusetts Department of Corrections report found that 70% of jail and prison inmates lacked a high school diploma or GED. The dropout crisis has fiscal consequences for local, state and federal governments, as well. Several types of fiscal costs include: 1) lower income payroll taxes collected due to lower earnings; 2) higher Medicaid, Medicare, and public assistance costs; and 3) higher incarceration costs (Lochner and Moretti, 2004). According to these authors, the nation would save approximately 45 billion dollars if it could cut the number of dropouts in half.
Each year almost one-third of all public high school students across America fail to graduate from public high school with their four year cohort (Bridgeland, et.al., 2006). In an increasingly competitive global economy, the consequences of dropping out of high school are devastating to individuals, communities and our national economy. At the absolute minimum, adults need a high school diploma if they are to have any reasonable opportunities to earn a living wage. Most businesses, as well as the military, are reporting they need workers with technical skills that require at least a high school diploma.

**Student Perspectives in the Research**

Research has given attention to students’ sense of connectedness to school and its influence on their decisions to stay in or drop out (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004; Knesting & Waldron, 2006; Cushman, 2003). Studies revealed the following consistent reasons for students who decided to drop out of school: (1) boring classrooms, irrelevant and a waste of time; (2) no positive relationships with teachers; (3) no positive relationships with other students; (4) frequent suspension; (5) not feeling safe at school; (6) failing, schoolwork, and lack of support; (7) coursework not demanding and routine work activities that did not challenge student’s time and energy; and (8) trying unsuccessfully to combine work and attending school (Corville-Smith, 1995; Clement, Gwynne, and Younkin, 2001; Wagstaff, Combs, and Jarvis, 2000; Corville-Smith, et.al., 1998). The qualitative research by Clement, et.al. (2001) examined the perspectives of school principals, teachers, and students on attendance policies in Broward County School District in Florida. Students reported that academic performance was related more to a student’s attitude about school and learning than to his or her attendance pattern. When school, or a particular class was viewed as boring or irrelevant, students felt attendance became unnecessary and a waste of valuable time. Wagstaff, et.al. (2000) investigated factors affecting
high school students’ attendance. Interview data and a review of attendance data revealed serious problems in how students perceived they were treated by staff as well as problems related to school climate and instruction practices.

Knefting and Waldron (2006) conducted a qualitative case study of seventeen high school students identified as at-risk for dropping out of school. Their research described the process of the students’ persistence and support they received from teachers and administrators. Through interviews and observations of students and staff, these researchers found three interactive factors to be 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 (including regular school attendance), and
c) meaningful connections-relationships with staff who believed these students could graduate and provided support and caring (p. 603).

Unfortunately, there are few current research studies found in which students’ stories specifically connecting poor attendance to dropping out of school (Farrell, 1994). Research did however illustrate students’ perceptions about their teachers (Marquez-Zenkov, Harmon, VanLier, & Marquez-Zenkov, 2007) and students’ reason why they choose not to drop out of school (Lessard, Fortin, Marcotte, Potvin, & Royer, 2009). Moreover, the latest information shared directly from students is not found in the educational journals, but rather on YouTube and other social networks. This form of communication is this generation’s avenue for getting their stories heard.
Parent Perspectives in the Research

In an effort to give parents a voice and provide ideas on how schools and parents can work more effectively together, Bridgeland, Dilulio, Streeter and Mason (2008) conducted a series of focus groups and surveys over 1,000 parents across America. The authors suggest:

The critical role parents can play in the education of their children is often a blind assumption or a target of attack. Our education debates often end in the blame game- pointing fingers at parents who do not care enough to ensure their child succeeds in school, or at the teachers who do not do enough to include parents in the process of learning (p.3).

The findings of this study suggested that parents want what is best for their child and share a belief about the importance of education regardless of income and educational attainment levels.

While lack of time is a barrier to parental participation, more than one-third of the parents identified real and perceived disconnects between the school and home. Some reasons parents gave for this disconnection include the following: 1) lack of communication from the school, 2) lack of information regarding their child’s education, 3) their lack of knowledge about what is being taught, 4) resistance from the school, 5) an unwelcoming school climate (Bridgeland, et.al., 2006, p.5).

Teacher/Administrator Perspectives in the Research

Bridgeland, Dilulio and Balfanz conducted a study in 2009 which completed their investigation of various perspectives related to the dropout crisis in America. They conducted focus groups and surveyed teachers, principals, superintendents and school committee members from districts across the country with high dropout rates. The participants recognized the dropout problem and expressed support for reforms to address the problem. However, sixty-one
percent of teachers and 45% of principals saw lack of support at home as a factor in the majority of cases of students dropping out of school (p.22).

Bridgeland, Dilulio, and Morison (2006) discussed a clear expectations gap between the findings of this study and the findings of their previous *Silent Epidemic* report. In that original study, 213 dropouts reported they would have worked harder if more was demanded of them. Yet, less than one-third of teachers believe schools should have high expectations for all students; and half of the principals did not believe at-risk students would respond to high expectations. Furthermore, dropouts have repeatedly reported that they left school because they found it boring and did not see the relevance of school to real life (Finn, 1989). This idea clearly contradicts what school personnel believed, as 42% of teachers felt students who said school was boring were just making excuses (Bridgeland, et.al., 2009, p.22). However, teacher reports from the Clement, et.al. (2001) study also pointed out that among those students who did not care or who had mentally withdrawn, attendance bore no relationship to learning. Teachers felt that those students were simply not being served well by a traditional high school and that other alternatives should be found (e.g., adult or vocational centers).

**Interventions to Encourage School Attendance**

Bridgeland, Dilulio and Balfanz (2009) suggest that districts prioritize efforts in order to develop a comprehensive approach to combating truancy and dropouts. In fact, they specified the importance of accurate data collection, setting high expectations for all students, communication, and alternative learning environments. Finn (2009) supports the above mentioned suggestions but stresses the importance of designing such activities to be meaningful and motivating to students because simply, studying, completing assignments and tests do not present themselves as inherently satisfying to most students (p.137). Zinn (2008) believes that
serious and fun learning builds resiliency, empowers students, develops critical and creative thinking, and increases motivation (p.158). Such findings indicate areas that schools can easily incorporate into the classroom as well as after school programs and activities to attract students who are at-risk for dropping out of school.

Although many findings suggest that interventions designed to improve engagement in school and improve the school’s environment may have beneficial effects on truancy (Henry, 2007), none have resulted in finding the answer for large urban school districts. Dynarski and Gleason (2002) summarized implementation and impact findings from a large evaluation of federally funded dropout-prevention programs and Smink and Reimen (2009) provided 15 Effective Strategies for Truancy Prevention. However few authors have provided empirical evidence for their effectiveness (Bridgeland, et.al., 2009). Many of these authors questioned: Can dropping out be reduced or prevented? but did not offer a research design or data collection method for their research. Unfortunately, no program or intervention reviewed was able to improve all key educational outcomes (i.e., dropping out, attendance, behavior, test scores, and grades). These findings support the belief that dropping out of school is too easy and preventing dropouts is very hard.

Researchers find that schools are more likely to improve the dropout rate and reduce chronic school absenteeism with three broad strategies: (a) taking a comprehensive approach to attendance with activities that involve students, families and the community; (b) using more positive involvement activities than negative or punishing activities; and (c) sustaining a focus on improving attendance over time (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002, p.312). According to Henry (2007), there is consensus that successful interventions do more than increase student
attendance—they help students and families who feel marginalized in their relations with teachers and peers to be connected at school and with learning (p.34).

In their evaluation of successful programs and schools, Wehlage, Rutter, Lesko and Fernandez (1989), found an emphasis in each of the programs on developing a sense of community within the school, something believed to play an important role in the programs' success (Knesting & Waldron, 2006, p.599). According to Wehlage (1991), effective schools and their organizational practices must look beyond curricular and behavioral issues to provide students with a feeling of belonging and membership in the school. In an evaluation of successful programs in alternative high schools, Wehlage, et.al., (1989), found an emphasis in each of the programs on developing a sense of community within the school. Although important, there is a need to look beyond the limited scope of individual student characteristics and needs, and look further at their experiences within the school and with certain staff.

According to Rumberger (1987), more attention needs to be given to the influence that schools and their organization, leadership and teachers have on a student's decision to not attend school.

Addressing the dropout problem creates significant challenges for committees and school districts. Alternative education is one strategy used by school districts and educators throughout the United States to address the needs of dropouts. The number of alternative schools serving students at risk of school failure has grown significantly over the past decade. Available estimates suggest that there are over 20,000 alternative schools and programs currently in operation, most designed to reach students at risk of school failure. Alternative settings provide a variety of strategies such as small class size, one-on-one interaction between teachers and students, a supportive environment, student centered curriculum, flexibility in structure, and opportunities for students to engage in decision-making, (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Most
alternative schools operating today that serve youth in at-risk situations are designed to be part of a school district’s comprehensive dropout prevention program (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2009).

Summary

A review of the literature indicates that poor school attendance and the dropout epidemic across the United States has been a major concern for years. Research also proves what we know thru common sense: showing up to class is critical to succeeding in school (Attendance Works, 2011). Despite this knowledge and understanding, this pandemic has not been tackled with any real resolve nationally, or in New Bedford. Although services are greatly needed, they have not proved to be enough to motivate students to attend school and want to graduate. Thus, different authors point that a new way of addressing the dropout and attendance issues must be implemented in order help our students succeed. In order to do this, there must be a restructure of district expectations, staff responsibilities, and practices regarding school attendance. Furthermore, students, parents and the community must understand the importance of school attendance and its connection to the dropout crisis. Some researchers hypothesize if the reasons why students choose not to attend school are addressed, the dropout rate will improve. This project strived to better understand this intertwined phenomenon and develop a best practices model to improve school attendance rates and ultimately the dropout rate in the New Bedford Public Schools.
Chapter 3

Research Design

Research Questions

Student absenteeism and disengagement from school have for more than a decade reflected problems within the New Bedford Public Schools (NBPS), resulting in high dropout rates and low academic achievement of at-risk students. However, these issues have never been investigated within the district in an organized or comprehensive fashion. The overarching goal of this research project was to identify sound and effective practices for improving school attendance and reduce the number of dropouts in the NBPS. The researcher did so by exploring the experiences and insight of students, staff and parents of the NBPS regarding the reasons and factors that lead to student absenteeism and disengagement and strategies to confront it. The two overall questions of this case study are:

(1) How do different participants in the NBPS system explain the chronic absenteeism of students, and their own role in improving student attendance?

(2) Why do at-risk students in New Bedford choose to be absent from school and what do they believe would motivate them to attend school regularly?

The extant research and this researcher's practice-based knowledge indicated the following implicating factors for high absenteeism in the New Bedford Public Schools (NBPS): 1) student behavior, 2) retention in grade, 3) school culture and environment, 4) school leadership, 5) teacher attitude and expectations, 6) availability of support, and 7) socioeconomic conditions including poverty, minority status, family structure, etc. (Castellano, Stringfield,
Stone, & Lewis, 2001; Alexander, Entwistle & Horsey, 1997; Balfanz, 2007). It is well
documented that the interplay of these influences determines the climate of a school and causes
students to be engaged or disengaged, which in turns affects school attendance.

The purpose of this study was to give at-risk students a voice to explain their perceptions
about these and other factors that may explain the district’s chronic absenteeism, and their vision
of how to correct it. The researcher examined the problem deeper by also examining the
perspectives of twenty-seven students, thirty-five teachers, seven attendance officers, five
administrators, and one parent; involved in the students’ lives. Throughout the data collection
process the following sub-questions were explored: (a) How do students at the secondary level
talk about their engagement with school and their decision to attend or not attend? (b) How do
teachers, school and district staff make sense of student absenteeism and how do they view their
role in responding to and supporting them? (c) How does the classroom environment, including
teacher’s attitude influence students’ decision to attend class? (d) How do parents make sense of
their children’s absenteeism, and how do they view their role in responding to and supporting
them? (e) How do all of these participants think the New Bedford Public Schools can better
support student needs in order to encourage regular school attendance?

Regular school attendance is a key contributor toward student success. Lack of
attendance, by its very nature removes the student from the learning time essential for academic
success (Estridge, 2009; Attendance Works, 2011). In instances when absenteeism becomes
chronic, a dysfunctional relationship between the student and school exists (Rothman, 2001;
Bryk & Thum, 1989; Knesting & Waldron, 2006). By identifying what influences a student’s
decision not to attend school; teachers and administrators within the NBPS may be able to
address the conditions that contribute to absenteeism. Also, by identifying what motivates a
struggling student to stay in school and go to class, schools can proactively develop and guide supports for at-risk students and facilitate institutional changes.

Propositions

Yin (2003) suggests that propositions are necessary elements in case study research as they increase the likelihood that the researcher will be able to place limits on the scope of the study and therefore serves to focus the data collection. Potential propositions for this case study are the following:

- Students with chronic absenteeism in high school typically have a history of poor school attendance.
- Students who are low socio-economic status (SES) (i.e., eligible for free or reduced lunch) most often have poor school attendance.
- Students who have been retained in at least one grade are at higher risk for non-attendance.
- Students with poor conduct and more than three suspensions in one school year are at higher risk for non-attendance.
- Students who are juvenile court involved and/or involved with the Department of Youth Services for criminal behavior most often have poor school attendance in middle school and high school.
- Students who live in low socio-economic regions or neighborhoods of New Bedford (i.e., housing projects) make different decisions about the importance of attending school regularly and graduating.
- Students choose not to attend school due to disengagement from school.
- Students who do not feel welcome in school have higher absenteeism rates.
- Students with perceived poor relationships with school staff are often unmotivated to attend school.
- Students attend school more regularly when they receive support from home and their parent/caregiver set high expectations for educational attainment.
- Students who are encouraged to attend school by their peers, parent/guardian, and school staff attend school more regularly than students who are not.

Each of these propositions helped to define the data collection by determining the initial student sample and the content of protocols and instruments. Compiling existing quantitative data of students enrolled in grades 9-12 during the 2009-2010 school year who also have the described at-risk factors (i.e., history of poor attendance, low SES, poor grades/retention, and poor conduct/suspensions) helped to streamline the participant pool for the initial inquiry process. The additional propositions facilitated a deeper exploration of the research questions as they focused the analysis of data on student choices, motivation, relationships and perception of school climate as they related to school attendance.

**Methodology**

**Qualitative Approach**

The proposed research project employed a qualitative case study methodology, utilizing survey, focus group and interview data from eighty-three (83) participants. Qualitative research is *a means for exploring and understanding the meaning individuals or groups ascribe to a social or human problem* (Creswell, 2009, p.4). The use of diverse data sources makes certain the issue is not explored through only one lens, but rather a variety of lenses which allows
multiple features of the phenomenon to be more fully understood (Bogdan & Bilken, 1992). Each data source is one piece of the puzzle; with each piece contributing to the researcher’s understanding of the whole phenomenon (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p.554). This convergence of data added strength to the findings of this study and provided a greater understanding of the case. Although this researcher analyzed multiple types of existing data to inform the purposeful sampling strategy and to analyze the questions related to the organizational structure of the NBPS and services provided to at-risk students by the district, the overall study employed qualitative methods and the use of direct subject data in order to explore students experiences, perceptions and insight. Mathison (1988) supports such proposed combinations of data sources as he believes that regardless of the methodological perspective a researcher works from, it is important to use multiple methods and sources of data in order to withstand critique by colleagues.

This case study of the New Bedford Public Schools involved the structure and planning of the overall organization in regards to how it responds not only to the needs of at-risk youth who are not attending school regularly; but also how well the district prepares and supports staff in educating these students. Case study methodology provides tools for researchers to study such complex phenomena within their context, using a variety of data sources to inform professional practice, develop interventions and enable evidence-based decision making (Baxter & Jack, 2008). According to several authors, case studies allow the researcher to explore individuals, activities, programs or organizations (Creswell, 2008; Yin, 2003; Stake, 1995); and supports the deconstruction and subsequent reconstruction of various phenomena (Baxter & Jack, 2008, p.544). Because school absenteeism is such a complex phenomenon, qualitative inquiry and a
case study design allowed this researcher to approach the complexity of human behavior and social interactions in ways that do justice to the complexity (Ogbu, 1991).

**Case Study Design**

A single case study methodology was chosen in order to answer this study’s research questions and fully investigate the phenomenon of chronic absenteeism in the New Bedford Public Schools (NBPS) for several reasons. From an organizational perspective, Hart (1994) argues “the school is seen, in and of itself, as contributing to absenteeism and, at the same time, as the institution that can address the combined problems of the individual student” (p.7).

For purposes of this case study this researcher employed what Yin (2003) calls a descriptive case study in order to describe the phenomenon in the real-life context in which it occurs; both the NBPS and the students’ lives. There is a great deal of documentation that supports the use of descriptive case studies for investigating educational issues concerned with assessing attitudes, opinions, demographics, practices and procedures, in addition to causality and how such processes and perceptions developed (Gay & Airasian, 2003; Baxter & Jack, 2008). Additionally, it produces descriptive data that is presented in the respondents’ own words, further illustrating their views and experiences (Sarantakos, 2005).
Case Study Site

The New Bedford Public Schools (NBPS) was chosen as the setting of this qualitative case study to fully investigate the phenomena of chronic absenteeism. Data was collected and analyzed using the New Bedford High School and the Whaling City Alternative High School as the actual case sites.

The New Bedford Public Schools educates 12,461 students. According to the district’s 2009-2010 enrollment data, the number of females and males are almost identical. Data by race and ethnicity described a diverse student population of 51% White, 27.9% Hispanic and 11.8% African American. Furthermore, 65.6% of the district’s students are low income, 19.2% have been found to have a disability and eligible for special education services, and 21.8% of our students’ first language is not English. The district’s mission is “to develop a community of learners who are academically proficient, demonstrate strong character and exhibit self-confidence” (Bonner, 2008). It is clear from the demographics that New Bedford’s children face an uphill struggle to achieving success in school and in life. Unless all of our children attend school regularly we will continue to see the district’s statistical numbers for dropouts among the highest in the state.

New Bedford High School

New Bedford High School is a comprehensive high school in an urban Massachusetts district with over 2,600 students. The student population is diverse (15.3% African American, 22.3% Hispanic, 8% Multiracial, and 50.2% White). According to the district’s annual report card (2009), the high school’s dropout rate is 7.4%, compared to 2.9% statewide. New Bedford’s high school graduation rate is 60.3%, compared to 81% statewide. That is, of all the
students who entered New Bedford High School in 2005, 40% failed to graduate in 2009. The New Bedford High School graduation rates for students of color in the same four-year span are even lower: 57% for African Americans and 45% for Latino/as (www.newbedfordschools.org, 2009).

**Whaling City Alternative High School**

The Whaling City Alternative High School (WCAS) is an alternative school that was created in 2008 to service students in New Bedford who have been excluded from their neighborhood schools under MGL (Massachusetts General Laws) Chapter 70 Sections 37H or 37H ½ for drugs, weapons or assault on a staff person). Specific habitual offenses range from repeated disruption of school, defiance, disrespect of staff or students, fights, a large number of instances of using excessive verbally inappropriate language, or destruction of property. Truancy issues are usually associated with most habitual school offenders as well.

In September 2009, twenty-seven students were enrolled in the school. The numbers increased dramatically to 55 during the 2010 school year and 66 in the current (2011) school year; as students are constantly released from locked facilities or transferred from one of the three middle schools or high school. Thirty-six percent of the student population has been found eligible for special education services, compared to 19% district-wide. Current district data shows an average daily attendance rate of 80%; or approximately ten students are absent each day (www.newbedfordschools.org, 2010).
Participants

Students

Initially a purposeful sample of high school students who were at highest risk for dropping out of school was determined for this study. Prior to beginning the data collection process, a list of 279 students was compiled from the 2009-2010 district’s SIMS reporting based on the following at-risk indicators: 40+ days absent, 2+ suspensions, history of retention, and low SES (free or reduced lunch). These students selected were either: enrolled in grades 9-12, graduated or dropped out from either New Bedford High School or Whaling City Alternative High School.

Of the 279 potential student survey participants, none (0) responded to the information sent via US mail to their home addresses. As a result the researcher personally recruited student participants at New Bedford High School and Whaling City Alternative High School. The researcher conducted informational sessions during a peer mentoring class where repeating ninth graders with poor school attendance are mentored by upperclassmen at New Bedford High School; and at a student assembly at the Whaling City Alternative High School. The researcher explained the study in detail and distributed the informed consent forms to be signed by their parent/guardian. The researcher returned the following day to pick up the signed consents and schedule the focus groups at each site. 100% of the students who were personally approached obtained parent/guardian consent and agreed to participate in the study.

School Administrators

Five secondary level administrators participated in a focus group and two school administrators from New Bedford High School were interviewed. The purpose of gathering data
from school administrators was to capture information regarding what is being done at the building levels in regards to improving school attendance. The results of talking with school leaders allowed the researcher to explore how they understand and respond to the staff views regarding school climate, student-teacher relationships, school safety, and school policies. The focus group and interviews shed light on the connection between the school's organizational policies and attendance rates; as well as ideas for improving school attendance in New Bedford.

School Staff

Seven school attendance officers participated in a focus group. The primary role of school attendance officers is to address school attendance both at the individual student level and the school level from pre-school to grade 12. Their input helped to identify the level of consistency in their efforts to improve student attendance, more specifically what strategies and interventions they use. Their daily experiences working with students, school staff and parents could shed light into possible strategies to address the stagnant attendance problems in the district.

Additionally, the exploration of teachers' beliefs regarding the importance of school attendance and their perceived role of responsibility in creating a climate that ensures students attend school daily was invaluable to this study. Twenty-five teachers from NBHS completed an anonymous school climate survey and ten staff from WCAS participated in a focus group.

Parents

Although there are many stakeholders involved in the NBPS, for purposes of this study, the researcher focused on parents as the key external stakeholder for student attendance and achievement. The parents of the student participants who participated in the focus groups and/or
interviews were invited to participate in the study. The researcher attempted to engage these parents via informational packets sent to them via US mail, packets sent home with their children and personal phone calls by the researcher. Only one parent responded and agreed to be interviewed for the study.

Figures 4 and 5: Tentative Sequence and Schedule of Data Collection Activities

Stage 0: Compilation and Preliminary Analysis of Existing Data (Figure 4)

- DESE District Reportcards: Attendance, Suspension, Retention, etc.
- SIMS Student Database
- Student Handbooks: Policies/Procedures

Stage 1: New Data Collection (Figure 5)

- 25 Teachers from New Bedford High Schools completed the American School Climate Survey - Teacher Version
- Two NBHS Student Focus Group (20)
- One WCAS Student Focus Group (7)
- One Attendance Officer Focus Group (7)
- One WCAS Teacher Focus Group (10)
- One Administrator Focus Group (5)
- Two current WCAS students
- One dropout from NBHS
- Two graduates from WCAS
- One parent
- Two NBHS Administrators
Data Collection

Stage 0: Compilation of Existing Data and Preliminary Analysis

District Data

The thorough investigation of the New Bedford Public Schools provided a pathway for uncovering student-related factors, as well as school-based practices in place that play a role in the district’s chronic absenteeism. Potential organizational data sources for this case study included, archival records, local, state and federal reports, district and school level policies, handbooks, job descriptions, as well as observations, surveys, focus groups and interviews.

Data from the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education show New Bedford High School has not met the 92% requirement for the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Adequate Yearly Progress (AYP) attendance measure in more than ten years. The annual high school attendance rate for the 2009-2010 school year was 85.2%, an decrease from 86% for the 2008-2009 school year. This number continues to indicate approximately 300 students are absent from the high school every day. Additional high school data has shown the average annual number of days students are absent from the high school is 21.9, compared to 9.3 across the state. Further high school data has shown that during the same year more than 400 students were tardy from school each day (New Bedford Public Schools DESE District Report Card, 2009, 2010).

According to existing data, there is a high incidence of disruptive behavior at the high school level. The in-school suspension rate is 16.5% compared to 3.3% at the state level; and the out-of-school suspension rate at NBHS is 32.9% which is significantly higher than the state at
5.3% (New Bedford Public Schools DESE District Report Card, 2010). Retention rates at the high school (15%) also far exceed the district rate (6.4%) and state rate (2.3%).

Additionally, an investigation of the level of communication and data-sharing procedures regarding at-risk students, especially at transitional periods proved to be informative. It is clear that communication and data collection processes are inconsistently aligned across the district. There also appears to be inconsistent responses across the district regarding discipline and suspension policies for student behavior, course credit denial and retention as they relate to poor attendance and tardiness. Although such policies and procedures are often clearly outlined in student handbooks, Fallis (2000) found that staff sometimes respond to situations in an ad hoc way and trusting their experience to guide them. Therefore, by conducting focus groups with teachers and attendance officers and interviewing several leaders within the district, this researcher was able to uncover procedural inconsistencies or flaws in the district which may lead to increased poor attendance and dropout rates.

**Construction of Initial Sample of Student Participants**

Data was collected on students at the secondary level as they can more accurately reflect on their personal history and highlight both positive and negative experiences and possible reasons why they have chosen not to attend school. Additionally, students and parents at the elementary and middle school levels tend to have a more positive outlook and students do not yet have the insight or maturity to have such discussions. The number of participating students and selection procedures varied for each of the different data collection strategies.
Stage 1: New Data Collection

The collection of new data used a combination of methods: surveys, focus groups, and interviews. This researcher determined the schedule of the data collection strategies in an attempt to build upon the understanding of the reasons why students in New Bedford do not attend school regularly. In working with the Northeastern University Institutional Review Board (IRB), this researcher purposely staggered the development of the protocols to avoid contamination of data. The activities and questions facilitated in the focus groups were geared towards gathering broad data regarding why students do not attend school at each level: elementary, middle and high. The later purpose of the individual interviews was to gather more specific and personal data related to the information gathered in the focus group. Furthermore, the individuals who took part in the interview process were not participants in the focus groups.

Surveys

Surveys are useful tools as they allow for data collection from a larger number of participants than is often possible through other methods (Mertens, 1998). It was initially assumed the distribution of a survey to students and parents throughout the district could be easily accomplished with this researcher’s access to current enrollment status and home addresses. Unfortunately that was not the case. None of the students or parents who were sent the invitation for participation (279) returned the signed consents that were sent via the US Postal Service. In further studies conducted in the NBPS, personal recruitment of participants and explanation of the study is highly recommended.
Focus Groups

Because of the intertwined systemic issues across all levels which are associated with absenteeism, data from focus groups will be invaluable. Focus groups allowed the researcher to create a supportive environment, ask focused questions, encourage discussion and obtain multiple points of view (Krueger, 1988, p.18). The focus groups designed for this study were held with 50 participants in the following groups: 1 WCAS student group, 2 NBHS student groups, 1 WCAS high school teacher group, 1 attendance officer group and 1 secondary administrator group.

An advantage to conducting focus groups is because the method is more socially oriented and more relaxed than a one-to-one interview (Marshall & Rossman, 1999), which is especially important with participants possibly discussing sensitive issues. There are also limitations to this type of method that were taken into consideration. First, the role of this researcher within the school district could influence data collection in both positive and negative ways. The researcher considered that individuals who volunteer to participate may do so because it could be viewed as an opportunity to share personal agendas against the district or to impress the researcher due to her position as the assistant superintendent within the school district. As stated by Marshall and Rossman (1999), the focus group interviewer has less control over a group interview than an individual one, which can result in lost time while dead-end or irrelevant issues are discussed (p.115). However, as a Licensed Mental Health Counselor (LMHC), this researcher has been trained to facilitate the group process as well as effectively engage individual participants in a confidential setting which helps to elicit information and deal with potentially difficult situations.
Interviews

In-depth interviewing with open-ended questions was used as the final tier of data collection to gather individual participants' history, experiences, and opinions. Interviews allowed the participants to answer the questions from their own frame of reference rather than being confined by the structure of pre-arranged, close-ended questions (Baxter & Jack, 2008). The data obtained provided context and meaning to other data, which offered a more complete picture of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2003), and corroborated evidence obtained from the other data sources.

The researcher conducted in-depth interviews with several participant groups: two current Whaling City students, two Whaling City graduates and one dropout, one parent and two secondary level administrators. The specific questions for the interviews were developed using existing interview protocols; as well from the themes and ideas generated from the focus groups.

Figure 6: Data Collection Strategies and Participants

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Parents</th>
<th>School Administrators</th>
<th>Attendance Officers</th>
<th>Teachers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Data Analysis

Creswell describes the process of data analysis as moving deeper and deeper into understanding the data, representing the data, and making an interpretation of the larger meaning
of the data (2003, p.190). This rigorous, on-going process requires frequent reflections and the analytical questioning in order to present accurate findings (Sandelowski, 1993; Krefting, 1991). Therefore the researcher employed Creswell’s six step process to organize and better understand the data that was collected.

*Step 1: Organize and prepare the data for analysis*

Step one involved organizing and preparing the information for analysis. First, this process included organizing all of the pre-existing quantitative data related to students who met the initial at-risk criteria previously described. Artifacts or data items collected from the district’s SIMS data base was numbered and recorded. This initial database identified: a) the student or participant, b) demographic data for students such as age, grade, school, number of days absent, suspensions, retention, c) contact information, d) parent/guardian name, e) if consent was received and f) other descriptive comments. As previously stated, it should be noted that due to non-response, the initial sample of student participants were not used in the data collection process.

*Step 2: Read through all the data*

The second step required the researcher to read through the data to get an overview of what was collected and identify specific themes for organization. This process allowed the researcher to gain a better understanding of the whole picture and enabled the researcher to prepare for the next steps. As Maxwell (1996) suggested, the researcher’s ideas evolved as the data collection progressed, categories developed, and relationships between the data were explored. In order to further organize, sort, code and explore the incoming data the researcher wrote analytical memos based on critical analysis of the emerging data (Saldana, 2009). These
memos recorded the researcher’s critical impressions of the data as well as documented reflections based on both the research and the participants’ personal experiences.

**Step 3: Begin a detailed analysis with coding process**

In the third step, the researcher continued to review the data and analyzed the underlying meaning of each section of the data. Creswell (2009) described coding as “taking data or pictures gathered during data collection, segmenting sentences (or paragraphs) or images into categories, and labeling those categories with a term” (p. 186). Similarly, Saldana (2009) described coding as the transitional process between data collection and analysis, where the researcher reflects on a passage to decode its meaning and appropriately label, or encode it. The coding process was divided into two steps: a grounded-theory coding step and a theory-driven coding step. A code book was developed using the theoretical framework: organization and motivation, propositions and research questions. This step required that the data be coded using the code book and chunked by categorizing the information according to either Bolman and Deal’s (2003) broad four frames for organizations, types of motivation (i.e., intrinsic, extrinsic), and various factors that may affect school attendance.

**Step 3a: Grounded Coding**

During this process additional emic codes emerged from participants’ comments. It was expected that “codes that are surprising and not anticipated, codes that are unusual or of conceptual interest to the reader” would rise from the data record (Creswell, 2009, pp. 186-187).

This study employed a multi-stage process to move from preliminary code development through data interpretation. In this study the researcher used features of Saldana’s (2009) structural coding, in vivo coding, and values coding. Structural coding was found to be appropriate for
focus group, interview and open-ended survey responses and was used to identify data related to the propositions and research questions. In-vivo coding or literal coding described the actual language of participants. This method was especially useful in documenting the participants’ voices in this case study. Values coding applied codes to qualitative data that reflected a participant’s values, attitudes, and beliefs, representing his or her perspectives or worldview (Saldana, 2009, p. 89). All of these codes resulted in the development of reasons why at-risk students are chronically absent; and practices suggested for the improvement of attendance rates in the New Bedford Public Schools.

Step 3b: Theory Driven Coding

Etic codes were established to identify specific data focused on capturing meaning based on the study’s theoretical frameworks and literature review. According to Creswell (2009), these provisional or predetermined codes address topics that readers expect to find, based on past literature and common sense and codes that address a larger theoretical perspective in the literature (p.186-187). In this study, codes were established to apply to areas which reference the participants’ comments related to the following: the students’ perception of what could have motivated them to attend and the participants’ ideas and their views of their role in the change process. Other codes were used to indicate data that describe the participants’ understanding of their decision to not attend school in relation to their risk factors; as well as their level of understanding of how their decision could negatively impact their future. Also of particular interest in this study were the participant’s ideas for interventions and topics regarding the organizational structure and climate within the New Bedford Public Schools.
Organizational Data Analysis

Through employing the Four Frames of Bolman and Deal (2003) during the data collection process, the researcher was able to organize the data related to the New Bedford Public School’s attention to school attendance and dropout prevention, specifically the *The Where Are YOU Headed?* Campaign, into four primary categories: Structural, Human Resource, Political and Symbolic. These frames served as a lens through which this researcher was able to code the district’s organizational data.

The Bolman and Deal frames were utilized at the school and district levels to view a variety of situations that allow for deeper investigation and analysis. The structural frame helped the researcher to better understand the specialized roles and formal relationships that individuals have in the school setting, as well as how goals, policies and procedures of the organization affect school attendance (Bolman & Deal, 2003). The political frame, focused on how individuals in the organization deal with power and where the power is concentrated in regards to addressing poor school attendance (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Offsetting this notion is the symbolic frame, which focused on the heart of the school or district’s mission related to school attendance, including the social aspects of the school setting, ceremonies, rituals, celebrations and stories (Bolman & Deal, 2003). Finally, the human resource frame, helped to illustrate the interaction of the individuals of the school and district in an attempt to view them as a large and extended family. This frame looked specifically at the psychological aspects including the needs, feelings, prejudices, skills and limitations (Bolman and Deal, 2003, pg. 14) of staff and how they affect school climate, student engagement and absenteeism.
Motivational Data Analysis

Due to the nature of the study, the researcher sought to determine the factors that influence students’ motivation to attend school regularly. Motivation has been defined as an internal drive that activates behavior and gives it direction. The concept of motivation is concerned with the processes that describe why and how human behavior is activated and directed. The utilization of a case study design provided the greatest opportunity for fully understanding the phenomenon of how students may become disengaged and eventually decide to stop attending school. The fieldwork aspect of this approach allowed the researcher to interact with the study participants in their own natural setting (Gall, Gall & Borg, 2003).

Therefore, the use of multi-method data collection through the use of instruments such as district data, document reviews, surveys, focus groups and interviews provided this researcher the ability to triangulate the data ensuring greater validity (Creswell, 2003). Using the motivation lens, the researcher looked to determine what motivating factors could be provided to high risk students to encourage regular school attendance. By looking at the needs of the whole child, both intrinsic and extrinsic motivators were explored and coded. Further exploration of student motivation relied upon the categorization of ideas and themes as they relate to specific theorists discussed in the theoretical frameworks section of this proposal: Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs Theory which describes how motivation is affected by workplace (school) satisfaction, goal-setting theory, reinforcement theory, etc. Gathering an in depth understanding of what motivates our highest risk students has aided in the development of the district’s innovative Where Are YOU Headed? campaign. All of the programs and interventions within the campaign were designed to help engage students and encourage them to attend school, graduate and develop realistic goals for their future.
Step 4: Use coding process to generate a description of the setting or people as well as categories or themes for analysis

In step four, the descriptions of the categories were created using the generated themes, which were also supported by the data. Making sense out of the data can be quite overwhelming if the researcher does not have a structure in place to organize and prepare the data for analysis (Creswell, 2003). According to Creswell, the interpretation or “making meaning of the data” is the researcher’s attempt to summarize “what has been learned” and discuss how it confirms or contradicts past literature or theories (2009). During this stage, the researcher further reduced the data, by successively recoding the data and developing more refined themes and impressions. According to Saldana (2009) during this process of recoding the data, the researcher “further manages, filters, highlights, and focuses the salient feature of the qualitative data record for generating categories, themes, and concepts, grasping meaning, and/or building theory” (Saldana, 2009, p. 8). The broad reasons that most often influence a student’s decision to attend school were finally reduced into four main factors: community, family, student, and school.

Using this fourth step provided the researcher with a “systematic process of analyzing textual data” (Creswell, 2003, pg. 193). The researcher then triangulated the data, comparing for consistency (Patton, 2002) and adding to the validity of the themes that emerged. The researcher also determined inconsistencies and areas for further investigation.

Step 5: Use narrative passages to convey findings

The fifth step involved creating a narrative to present the material in a coherent manner. This allowed the researcher to highlight the connectedness of the data with the themes. This step also included a chronological description of the events with detailed information to paint an accurate picture of the process, as well as actual participants of the study. This step also helped
the researcher reach the goal of utilizing the experiences and insight of students, staff and parents of the NBPS to investigate the phenomenon, and most importantly, to give at-risk students a voice to explain their perceptions about factors that may explain the district’s chronic absenteeism, and their vision of how to correct it.

*Step 6: Interpret the data according to the researcher’s understanding*

The sixth step enabled the researcher to develop an explanation of what was learned from the data (Creswell, 2003), and determine how to present the findings in a meaningful way. Utilizing the organizational lens, the researcher illustrates the district’s understanding of the problem of chronic absenteeism; and it’s response to the problem. This lens provided the district with new staff-generated ideas for improving engagement and attendance for students who are at highest risk for dropping out of school. Thus, this rigorous research process helped to expand the scope of the *Where Are YOU Headed?* campaign to address the problem of chronic absenteeism within the New Bedford Public Schools.

**Trustworthiness**

The constructs of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability have been identified by Guba (1981) and favorably used by investigators to ensure the trustworthiness or the validity of qualitative inquiries will be employed in this study. Credibility assures that the study actually measures or tests what was intended, transferability is concerned that the results of the study can be applied to a wider population, with dependability the researcher strives to assure that another investigator can repeat the study, and confirmability attempts to demonstrate that the findings emerge from the data and not from the researcher’s own predispositions (Shenton, 2004).
Credibility

Comparable to quantitative tests for internal validity, this researcher used several strategies to demonstrate credibility, to assure that a true picture of the phenomenon under scrutiny is being presented (Shenton, 2004, p. 63). Using a multitude of data collection activities provided both breadth and depth to this inquiry. Additionally, the thoughtful revision of the sampling strategy, which engaged a variety of participants, was designed to gather a broad perspective of the individual needs of high risk youth, as well as the district’s understanding of absenteeism and its response to these students.

Transferability

Transferability discusses the applicability of the outcomes of a study to other situations (Guba, 1981). It is understood that the findings of qualitative case studies are specific to individuals and circumstances and are not readily generalizable. Because a much smaller sample size was used (compared to a quantitative study), the potential to generalize the findings to other school districts may have been affected. However, since the investigator provided detailed and thick information and descriptions (Geertz, 1973) about the community, district, school sites, and participants, it may allow other districts with similar demographics to relate or transfer the findings to their own situations (Shenton, 2004).

Dependability

Dependability ensures that another investigator could replicate the procedures in the proposed study and arrive at the same results (Yin, 2009). In order to support dependability the researcher of this study made certain that procedures were thoroughly documented. Furthermore, the researcher shared interpretations of the data from the focus groups and interviews with the
participants in order to provide opportunities for further discussion and clarification. Shenton (2004) explains how the final report of this study should document the investigation to include sections devoted to: a) research design and its implementation, describing what was planned and executed on a strategic level; b) the operational detail of the data gathering, addressing what was done in the field; c) reflective appraisal of the project or evaluating the effectiveness of the process of inquiry undertaken (p. 71-72).

Confirmability

Similar to objectivity, confirmability in qualitative measures seeks to ensure that as much as humanly possible, the findings are the result of the experience and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher (Shenton, 2004, p. 72). The triangulation of this study’s data has been effective in reducing the effect of this researcher’s bias. By employing what Guba (1981) describes as the practice of reflexivity in the report, the author of this study has acknowledged her predispositions, given explanations and revealed beliefs that reinforce decisions that were made and methods that were adopted, and has openly admitted weaknesses in the techniques that were employed.

Inter-Rater Reliability

Even in qualitative papers, attention to issues such as inter-rater reliability in coding data is essential (Boyatzis, 1998). This type of reliability refers to the extent to which two or more individuals (coders) agree and give consistent estimates of the same data and comments related to the phenomenon being studied. For purposes of this study, inter-rater reliability was especially important for several reasons. First, this researcher holds an administrative position in the school district. In order to avoid predetermined or biased conclusions, the researcher had
additional individuals code the data using the code book that was developed. As described by Hammersley and Gomm (1997), this is important because although the researcher’s accounts represent their reality, another coder could have different interpretations depending on their background knowledge and the empathy they may have with the participants’ situation.

**Ethical Considerations**

A case study was determined to be the best method for purposes of investigating the phenomenon of why so many students do not attend school in New Bedford and how the NBPS can better support and meet the needs of at-risk students who are at higher risk for chronic absenteeism and dropping out of school. Utilizing a case study methodological approach has been advantageous working within this school district because it has fostered a close collaboration between the researcher and participants (Crabtree & Miller, 1999). By allowing participants to tell their stories and describe their views, it has enabled the researcher to better understand their behavior (Lather, 1992; Baker & Jack, 2008).

As the researcher in this study and also the Assistant Superintendent of the New Bedford Public Schools, I have had to consider how my position may have biased both the collection and analysis of the data. As a potential limitation of the study, the researcher has considered whether the level of honesty by the staff directly or indirectly affects the generalizability of the results of this study. It is possible in some cases they may not be completely honest with their answers, not wanting to make a bad impression or appear negative towards students or the administration. It should be noted that in my position I do not directly evaluate any of the staff who participated in the data collection activities. Furthermore, my job description does not specify duties related directly to school attendance and I am not evaluated by the Superintendent of Schools based on the district’s attendance or dropout rates.
Protection of Human Subjects

Every effort was be made to assure all participants were fully informed of the nature and purpose of the study and their participation. The research project was presented to potential participants in a number of different ways: letters, phone calls, face to face meetings, etc. The informed consent forms were distributed and reviewed with attendees at each level of data collection. This was important as some participants were involved in several data collection activities and required information regarding how the inquiry would progress and become more detailed and specific. Throughout the process, individuals were given multiple opportunities to ask more questions and/or opt out of the project. A translated informed consent was developed and would have been distributed if necessary. Separate informed consent forms were designed for each participant group (student, teacher, attendance officer, administrator and parent) for the survey, the focus group, and the interview processes.

Confidentiality

Although there were no foreseeable risks to participants, this researcher has maintained confidentiality of participants. It must be noted however that although only this researcher has seen identifying information, the role of some participants has been identified in the final report. All individuals who were involved in coding data to ensure inter-rater reliability were trained in the described procedures to maintain confidentiality.

Audio tapes of the focus groups and focus group/interview transcriptions are kept in the researcher's locked home office file cabinet and will be destroyed within six months of the study's completion. Digital records of the transcriptions are also being kept on the researcher's
computer hard drive and back-up drive. Paper and digital records of the data will be destroyed within six months of the study’s completion.

**Limitations of the Study**

The findings of this study may have generalizability limitations due to the small sample size and whether it can be used to explain chronic absenteeism with other student populations or in other school districts (Guba & Lincoln, 1985). However, because the purpose of this study was to examine individuals’ perceptions and experiences in detail, it was best accomplished by focusing closely on a small number of participants (Patrick & Yoon, 2004).

Another potential limitation of the study is the researcher’s pre-existing relationships with many staff (e.g., I directly supervised the Attendance Officers in my previous position and have developed friendships with many staff). However, I do not have any known existing tensions with staff and am not directly recruiting specific staff for their participation. This researcher provided staff with information regarding the study and staff expectations prior to asking for consent. The purpose of this study was fully discussed, along with the encouragement that candid and rich descriptions of experiences and beliefs are desired and there would be no repercussions for staff who expressed their true feelings and beliefs, and if such information was used it will be kept anonymous.

**Summary**

The researcher uses several forms of data collection strategies (survey, focus groups, and interviews) with various participant groups, thus providing the opportunity to triangulate the data. Triangulation of the multiple data sources provided strength to the study, because the researcher was able to take the results of the measures and cross check them with other sources
of data (i.e. school and district data). The combination of these multiple method strategies helped to reduce errors and increase validity by allowing for cross-data comparison (Patton, 2002).

Through evaluating inconsistencies, there were opportunities to look deeper into the relationship between the methods of inquiry, the results, and how those results relate to the phenomenon of chronic school absenteeism in the New Bedford Public Schools. Furthermore, the design and process of this study allowed the researcher to develop the *Where Are You Headed?* school attendance and graduation initiative within the New Bedford Public Schools, using the literature review, theoretical frameworks, propositions, and data.
Chapter 4

Research Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to give at-risk students, parents, teachers, attendance officers, and administrators a voice to explain their perceptions and experiences to help explain New Bedford Public Schools' chronic absenteeism and their vision and ideas of how to correct it. The overarching goal of this study was to identify sound and effective strategies to improve school practices for improving school attendance and ultimately reduce the number of students who drop out of the New Bedford Public Schools. The researcher explored the experiences and insight of New Bedford's students, parents and staff regarding the factors that lead to disengagement from school and chronic absenteeism. The two overall questions of this case study are: 1) How do different participants in the New Bedford Public Schools system explain the chronic absenteeism of students? and 2) Why do at-risk students in New Bedford choose to be absent from school, what messages do they receive that impacts their decisions and what do they believe needs to change in order to motivate them to attend school regularly?

Upon examination of the data, the reasons why students in New Bedford may exhibit chronic absenteeism were clustered in four themes (Figure 7): 1) community factors, 2) family factors, 3) student factors and...
4) school factors. These common themes were strongly represented by all participant groups; and each theme was substantiated by at least two data sources including district data, survey, focus group and interview data. As this researcher further discusses the findings by themes, it will become clear that the evolution of and combinations of these themes capture the essence of why individual students in New Bedford become disengaged and stop attending school. The following table (Figure 8) illustrates the most recurring reasons given by the study’s participants which help to explain more thoroughly each of the four themes:

**Community Factors**

The environment in which one lives can play a major role in whether one’s basic needs are met, what expectations are prioritized and ultimately which decisions will an individual make about school. The findings of this study will be discussed in relation to these three points. Research shows that children who grow up in poor, violent and distressed neighborhoods are at higher risk for dropping out of school (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2009; Lambert,
These community factors that plague New Bedford’s most distressed neighborhoods are a part of many student’s daily lives, and eventually influence their decisions, including whether to attend school and graduate.

A review of local demographic data and policy documents reveal that the New Bedford community suffers from a multitude of problems. The city has the second highest unemployment rate in the state and the lowest median household income in the state. 29.5% of New Bedford’s children under 18 years of age live in poverty, compared to 12% statewide. New Bedford’s high rate of violence also endangers the children who are subject to and/or witness to violence, whether it is domestic violence or street violence. New Bedford also has the tenth highest child abuse reporting rate in the state; and parental substance abuse factors into more than 60% of those reported child abuse cases (Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2002).

According to the data, 42.4% of New Bedford adults lack a high school diploma, almost three times higher than the statewide average of 15.2%.

Participants’ Experiences in New Bedford

Participants (all introduced with pseudonym names) in this study gave testimony of how the community’s context influences students through their family dynamics, neighborhood and peer socialization. As a result of the serious community factors, many families are suffering. The cycles of poverty, lack of education and unemployment continue because many residents may be unaware of how to rise up from their circumstances or understand the major role education plays.

Four students from the Whaling City Alternative High School and one dropout from New Bedford High School were interviewed and recalled receiving messages about what was most
important in life from their family and friends. Unfortunately, they explained that attending school and obtaining a high school diploma was never at the top of the list. The older guys tell you to ‘gang bang’ forever and you don’t need your diploma (Alexander, Whaling City Student). Everyone just expected me to be tough, not to be smart (John, Whaling City Graduate). It appears from their testimonies that it is often the power that comes with earning a certain reputation and respect on the streets of New Bedford that is one of the most powerful messages of all and also what offers the most immediate satisfaction of their adolescent needs.

Damon, a senior at Whaling City High School offered the following scenario during a focus group:

It is tough for some of these kids who live in the hood, the ghetto. This is when they start to get caught up in the gang stuff, trying to drink and smoke weed to be cool, making money and ‘reppin their block’ and school is becoming less and less important.

The parent interview of Ms. Santia (pseudonym) shed light on one mother’s attempts to maintain control over her children while living in a distressed New Bedford neighborhood where gangs, drinking, smoking, violence and sex controls the residents. This mother takes great pride that she has not allowed the chaos in her neighborhood to entice her into a life of drugs; but added that she sometimes feels hopeless and has experienced heartache at the hands of her children. Ms. Santiago added, in today’s society, these kids get so much pressure from gangs and dealers. These dealers will give them something to try and they know if they can hook them, they will keep coming to them. It is very hard for the kids outside.
During the interview Ms. Santiago made a clear distinction between herself and those parents who do not care about their children. She told a very emotional story of her daughter's 14 year old friend who will go to her home at two o'clock in the morning on a school night crying, "My mother is drunk. She threw me out. Can I stay here?" This situation she described is one way in which community issues such as substance use impacts families, and indirectly our students' lives.

**Family Factors**

**Role of Parents**

Attendance Officer Woodson offered that the lives of chronically absent students are "incredibly chaotic," "disorganized," and "unstructured," and then added, "It is easier for them to let their children stay home and then blame the school, than to organize their lives so their children can get to school." All of the attendance officers agreed that the parents of chronically absent students do not take responsibility for their child's poor attendance and often attribute the blame to the teacher or school or "make excuses."

When we go into these homes we can see that the kids are not prepared to go to school. There are no role models and no one is waking them up. I can tell you I have actually had to wake parents up. Their kids never went to school and the parent had absolutely no idea that they are outside playing. There is a real lack of any motivation on some of the parents' part regarding their child's education (Attendance Officer Woodson).

Attendance officers emphasized the role that parents and family life plays in students' school attendance, particularly in the elementary years. We can definitely identify students that
will eventually drop out very early based on the family dynamics. But it is not the kids’ faults. Some of these kids are up all night long dealing with domestic violence, substance abuse, shootings in their neighborhoods. In fact, the attendance officers believe that the safety and consistency of school is a motivator for young children. Officer Norton suggested:

The kids know that school is safer than home. They get food, attention and love. They know nothing bad will happen to them in school, but it is the parents in these circumstances who do not always provide the necessary support structure to get their children to school.

Students from the Whaling City Alternative High School suggest their disengagement from school began when no one in their home insisted they attend school every day. The students were asked the question, “What messages did you get from home about education?” Their answers included: “That going to school every day is not important,” “Education doesn’t really matter,” “It is easier to just collect welfare than to go to work every day,” “That it is ok to just maintain the status quo in life.” The students at Whaling City suggested that kids need to get the message that their education is important at a very young age and that message needs to continue throughout their lives.

By not receiving positive messages and making the connection between attending school regularly and educational success is detrimental to these students. Alexander (a current junior at WCAS) explained, “Because if you start young with your parents not caring if you go to school, you are going to grow up with that same mentality and by high school, you will drop out.” One recent WCAS graduate, Matt, stressed that it is essential for parents to talk to their children about the importance of education in elementary school because they will still listen to you and you
can mold them whereas,  once they get to middle school and high school they have
their minds set and some are just a lost cause by then.

**Structures of Support**

Students are for the most part a product of their home environment and education starts in the home. If they do not get the message that school attendance is important early, it is too late by the time they get to high school (John, Whaling City Graduate). Ms. Masty, a teacher from WCAS, offered a possible reason for the lack of parental involvement and expectations for school attendance and graduation that is often experienced at the secondary level:

It is a vicious cycle because many of these parents don’t know how to teach their kids to be successful in school. They were never successful in school; they do not feel comfortable coming into the school and most are dropouts themselves.

The attendance officers’ responses also revealed a real emphasis on the role parents play in regards to their child’s education and daily school attendance. The consensus of these participants is that family issues are at the heart of attendance problems at the elementary level in New Bedford. Difficulties communicating and working with parents prior to court involvement are seen as a barrier to a student’s success. Attendance Officer Gomes described the attempts to communicate and proactively work with parents as frustrating and described ongoing issues fueled by parents not returning phone calls and not answering the door, even when we know they are home.
**Expectations and Goals**

Ms. Costa, the counselor at Whaling City described a conversation she had with an incoming student and his parent regarding goals for the year. The parent's goal for her child was, “I want him to stop doing what he is doing and not get locked up again.” This statement is an example of how the dire circumstances of many of these families set priorities differently, relegating education to a second place, perhaps not realizing that education could be an avenue to achieve the most immediate aspirations. Either way, it impacts their ability to encourage school attendance or help their child develop meaningful life goals.

During that same conversation regarding the development of goals, the student stated that his goal was to be a professional basketball player. Although the reality of that happening for any high school student is a long shot, it is impossible for this particular student as he has never played on an organized team and admits that he only plays basketball once in a while. This example paints a recurring theme regarding our city's highest risk youth. This may be the result of the students' lack of maturity or insight and positive experiences and opportunities needed to develop realistic long term goals.

**Student Factors**

Student factors are at the heart of the problem as each of the other themes (community, family and school) and can affect individual students in different ways, depending on the student's level of maturity and other elements such as, motivational readiness, emotional well-being, feelings of hope, etc.

Ms. Costa, the school counselor at Whaling City, stressed how community factors can become student factors and eventually develop into school factors:
Many of the kids are hopeless and they do not realize it. They get stuck in that gangster mentality and will tell me they are going to either end up in jail or dead and that is ok with them because that is what they know. Even if they wanted to get out of that life, they have no idea how to do so, and it spills over into the schools.

Adding to students' life struggles are their failing grades as a result of irregular school attendance. The attendance officers described the influence student factors begin to play in chronic absenteeism in middle school. Without strong habits in place from elementary school regarding attendance, homework, reading, etc. the students are already behind their peers. The middle school transition is difficult for many students, even those who attend school regularly. The attendance officers state this is the time they begin to see students really disengage from school.

When and if the student does return to school, they are so far behind and cannot catch up, so they stay out more or they act out and get suspended; and any motivation they may have had is out the door. They become disengaged from school because they cannot get themselves out of the rut (Attendance Officer Norton).

*Maturity and Insight*

Although such school factors such as teacher attitudes and poor relationships with staff affect some students adversely, the upperclassmen at NBHS suggest the younger students should be responsible for their behavior; “Kids in high school should be responsible for their own actions and should be there to learn, not to give teachers a hard time and make it difficult for
them to teach. Another NBHS upperclassman offered that some students, don’t get it, they just think about what they are doing right now, they don’t think about their future. Students also described a clear distinction between different students at New Bedford High School:

There are some kids who want to be in school and some who don’t. If they don’t want to be here, no matter what you do, it won’t help and some kids really don’t care about school. Another upperclassman added, This is high school. Students shouldn’t have to be babied and they should be more serious about their work. Another high school student added, The kids at NBHS think that by sitting with their head down or walking out of class they are hurting the teacher, but they are hurting themselves and they don’t get it yet.

There was a clear indication in the data that there may be a significant difference in thinking between the 9th graders and upperclassmen in the New Bedford High School focus group, which was revealed in their responses to the question, What motivates you? The following diagram (Figure 9) illustrates the differences:

The student participants at NBHS openly discussed how maturity plays a role in various situations that affect students. For example, the difficulty of transitioning from middle school to
high school was at the top of the list as a reason why students either skip or do not attend school. One 12th grade student explained:

I think in high school they give you a lot of freedom. At 14 or 15 years old, most kids are not in a place that they can handle the freedom. I thought so differently when I was a freshman. It was cool to skip in 9th grade because we were never able to do it in middle school, but now I realize skipping will get me nowhere.

As over-aged students (18-20 years old), the focus group participants from Whaling City, recognize that middle school students are very immature, and one stressed, it really doesn’t make sense the way they act. When asked how immaturity at the middle school age affects one’s education, Matt, a recent graduate stated, kids ruin their entire lives at that age and they don’t even realize it until it’s too late.

Conversation with the Whaling City students led to their determination that it was not until they had experienced success, formed positive relationships with staff and received consistent positive messages they realized the importance of their education. Crystal (21 year old Senior at WCAS) indicated a strong connection between her level of maturity and her understanding of the importance of an education. The researcher asked the participants their thoughts on whether they thought kids should be able to drop out when they are 16 years old. Immediately all of the participants answered No! A current 19 year old junior stated, Sixteen year olds don’t know what they are doing. Crystal added a personal recollection:

That’s what I did, the day I turned 16 years old. And I didn’t have a clue. I don’t think kids should be able to drop out until they are 18 years old because that is when they begin to realize and ask themselves, What am I doing?
The researcher then asked each student to think back four-five years and answer the question, "Would you have responded positively to a teacher at any school who was trying to get you to do the right thing and respect the educational process?" The group of students laughed and all agreed, "Probably not!" and offered once again, "We were so immature back then, we thought we knew it all!"

**Individual Student Profiles**

Four of the five students who agreed to participate in individual interviews with the researcher are profiled in this study. Each of these students: 1) received free lunch, 2) live in a distressed neighborhood, 3) have been retained at least once, and 4) either are or have been court involved. Beyond attempting to discover facts about their experiences in the New Bedford Public Schools, the researcher sought to explore what obstacles impeded their decision to attend school as well as what now motivates them. The researcher depended on the students to share with her their thoughts and experiences in order to determine what needs to change in the lives of youth in New Bedford in order to create a community that values education and ultimately decrease the dropout rate.

Each student interview lasted between 45-60 minutes. The students were asked to recall their childhood and their experiences in school. They were then asked to take the researcher on their life’s journey, keeping in mind the following: 1) What was school like for you at each level: elementary, middle and high school? 2) What messages were you receiving about the importance of school and who were they coming from? 3) What was most motivating to you when you made the decision to stop regularly attending school? 4) What changed your thinking regarding the importance of your education?
In addition, the researcher examined each individual student’s educational history and intake information at the time they entered Whaling City. The intent was to not only gather additional detailed information but to also validate their personal recollections. The following student profiles tell a powerful story of the everyday lives of at-risk youth in New Bedford and the challenges they face in regards to obtaining their high school diploma. In addition to sharing their personal stories, their voices also captured what disengaged youth cannot often communicate about their fears and their need for structure, acceptance, relationships, love and encouragement. Each student chose a fictitious name for the researcher to use in order to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

**Student 1: Alexander**

Alexander (pseudonym) is a 19 year old African American male. He lives in the third floor apartment of a tenement house in the north end of New Bedford. His mother and brother are currently incarcerated, and he lives with his older sister. He will be entering his senior year of high school at the Whaling City Alternative School in September 2011. His school records indicate that he was administratively transferred to the alternative school from New Bedford High School in his freshman year, after his release from a Department of Youth Services-locked facility. Alexander’s criminal charges include: assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, attempted murder (with a samurai sword), disturbing the peace, possession of Class B substance with intent to distribute. Attendance data from his educational history signifies a chronic pattern of absences in the New Bedford Public Schools since 6th grade. Alexander has been absent a total of 343 days over the past five years. That equals almost two years of a lost education due to non-attendance.
Alexander describes his education becoming “rocky” when he transitioned into middle school. He remembers the transition being difficult because he tried to fit in with the older kids and eventually ended up gang involved. Because he saw his older brother living the gang life he decided he wanted to follow in his footsteps. Despite the poor choices he made, Alexander claims he still attended school regularly up until this point. He also recalls his mother losing control of him in the 6th grade because she stopped insisting he attend school and let him hang out with his friends into the night. Alexander explains that his mother had her own issues to deal with at that time and everything in his life really changed when he entered the high school.

There was a lot more trouble for me to get into and a lot more drama, especially with rival gangs. It was not safe for me to attend that school at that time. I had absolutely no motivation to be at school. I did not care about school at all. It was all about the street life!

Alexander has been enrolled at the Whaling City Alternative School for three years. He states that it was not until his second year that his thinking changed in regards to his education and his life. He recalls that all of the teachers at Whaling City cared so much I thought it was all fake. I couldn’t believe these people cared about me and whether I came to school or did my homework because no one has ever cared about that stuff. He discussed how this newly experienced support was not always enough to get him off the streets during the first few years because the pull of the streets is so powerful! Alexander suggests that students need that level of positivity from all directions to combat that strong pull, but stresses:

The key to motivation is getting it from home. Most kids really need the encouragement from their parents. It is great when your teachers tell you that you
can do it, but it isn’t as good as when your mom tells you and you know she cares about you.

Alexander shared that he cannot remember his mother offering him attention or encouragement about his education, and he believes she expected him to live the gang life too. She always told me I had to learn on my own and that she wouldn’t always be here for me. He added, I always wanted that from her, I still want it from her.

The repeated messages Alexander heard about what was really important influenced his life and his beliefs about education (Figure 10). According to his earlier memories, the following negative messages had the greatest impact on his thinking and the poor decisions that he made over the years.

- My family has always been in gangs and I thought that was the way I was supposed to go.
- The older guys say you can gang bang forever and you don’t need your diploma.
- My mother tells me I have to learn on my own.
- When my older brother went to prison, everyone expected me to sell drugs to help pay the bills.
- Teachers at the high school don’t have the time to care about kids like me.
- When I get stressed out, I tell myself that I can’t do it.

Now, at 19 years old, Alexander has insight into the dead ends of street life and is working towards earning his high school diploma. He describes how he used to live in the moment and sought out situations that would provide him with a sense of instant gratification.
I can see that everything I did was all about that need for power or glory. It’s like you get high for a moment here and a moment there. For example, if you jump someone and all of your boys are going crazy, you get that feeling that you are invincible!

Alexander clearly declares that he does not want the gang life anymore and wants to go to college after his high school graduation. He is planning on his senior year being the best year with no more streets, no more gangs, and no more drugs. I am turning my life around.

Although he thanks the staff at Whaling City for helping him to motivate him to take his education seriously, he admits that if he wasn’t ready to do it for himself no matter what was put in place for me, it wouldn’t make a difference and it couldn’t compete with the power of the streets. I have to be my own motivation for me to really do this.

**Student 2: Matt**

Matt (pseudonym) is a 19 year old Portuguese male who graduated from Whaling City Alternative School in 2010 and recently completed basic training in the Army National Guard. He moved to the United States from Portugal at the age of five and learned to speak English when entered a New Bedford Public Schools bilingual kindergarten class. He currently lives between homes; either with his parents or his girlfriend and six month old son.

Matt’s school records indicate that he was administratively transferred to the alternative school from Roosevelt Middle School in his 7th grade year. Matt’s criminal charges include: assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, disturbing the peace, possession of a stolen vehicle, disorderly conduct, and habitual school offender. Attendance data from his educational
history signifies a chronic pattern of absences since the 6th grade. Matt has been absent a total of 212 days over the past six years.

Matt clearly remembers having an unremarkable history in elementary school and states he was always well behaved and respectful. "It all started when I was in the 6th grade," he recalls. He was removed from Roosevelt Middle School for possession of a weapon and an assault on another student. He was administratively transferred to Keith Middle School and within one week he assaulted a student due to rival gang issues and was transferred to the district's alternative school, Westside. Matt reports he attended this school for one day and then made the choice to be absent for the following 70 days in a row.

When asked about his parents' response to the difficulties he was having in school, he explained that they never really understood what was going on because they did not speak English. His parents' inability to communicate with his school and his model behavior while at home allowed him to manipulative situations easily and avoid any real consequences.

When Matt was in the 8th grade he was gang involved, representing the city's South Side. "This was the time my parents found out what I was doing because I started to get arrested and they would have to pick me up at the police station." His mother responded by crying and begging him to stop, telling him that he was really a good boy, while his father would yell at him and "smack him in the head." He remembers that he felt horrible for upsetting his parents but it was not enough to get him to stop engaging in gang behavior. Matt described his desire to earn respect on the streets and explained he would earn it by fighting West End gang members, stealing cars and anything else he could do to fit in and be respected by the older kids. He acknowledges that,
The streets were my whole motivation at that time. I never even thought about school. It wasn’t that I really hated school for any particular reason. I mean it was boring because what they were teaching us had nothing to do with my reality at the time. My life was about being tougher than anyone else around me. I wanted to be feared, no, I needed to be feared back then. I was really stupid.

Matt was one of the first students to attend the district’s redesigned alternative school, Whaling City. Throughout his enrollment at Whaling City, the staff and administration viewed him as a top student and a role model for his peers. Matt maintained the highest standards on the school’s behavioral system and he was often asked to work closely with younger students in the school. His maturation was evident when he stated, “I realized that I had always been a follower, and I truly wanted to be a leader.” When Matt graduated from Whaling City High School in 2010, he was the first male in his family to ever do so.

“It hit me one day that I wanted to better myself,” stated Matt as he described his gradual departure from the gang life. He explained that he wanted to stop hurting his family and felt responsible for his mother’s worsening battle with diabetes. Matt acknowledges both the importance of his family for never giving up on him and always trying to instill good values in him; and the staff at Whaling City for their constant encouragement. Matt explained that the staff at Whaling City would not let him just sit there and do nothing. “Everyone pushed me and everyone told me I could do it every single day. It was not like my other schools where staff would say, ‘If you don’t want to be here, go home.’” Matt is openly thankful that he reconsidered the direction of his future and made the decision to change his life. He also credits the evolution of the gangs in New Bedford as one of the main reasons he started to rethink his actions. Matt explained to the researcher that when he was ‘reppin’ the ‘South Side’ it was
simply a geographical feud in which kids would fight each other to prove who had the most power and prestige. Within the past several years, nation gangs have infiltrated the most distressed neighborhoods and created a deeper dimension to gang involvement.

It is Nation over gang … Nation over hood … Nation over everything, even if that means having to fight a family member. For example, if we were both from the West End but I got blessed into the Bloods and they had a problem with you, I would have to sit back and watch. We could be best friends or cousins but I couldn’t help you if the Bloods jumped you because then I could be violated.

Matt rationalized that many youth in New Bedford, especially those who do not have a supportive family, are easily recruited by gangs because they want to belong and want protection in the community. He explained that many youth in New Bedford hang out in the neighborhoods from the time they get home from school to the middle of the night. If you don’t do that then you don’t belong and you are an outcast in the hood. Throughout the interview Matt described both the direct and subliminal messages from his parents, teachers and peers he received growing up that influenced his decisions later in life. Despite the negative messages about school he received from his peers; and the lack of support he perceived from his teachers, he stressed the difference in his life was his parents always providing him messages which included a dose of positivity (Figure 11). They made it clear that they cared about him and his future.
When asked why he believed other students who have similar backgrounds and attend Whaling City do not respond to the interventions put into place for them he responded,

“Honestly, I think it is the lack of encouragement from their families.” Matt explained that his situation was different from most of his peers because:

I have always had the support of family no matter what I did and I think that made the difference for me. My parents may not have known how to get me into college because they quit school in the second grade to go to work, but they taught me how to be a good person, to work hard and they always knew that I needed my education.

Matt also credits his success with the fact that he always had a dream and his goal was to enlist in the military and serve his country. “The Army was the best thing I ever did. It has prepared me to drive on and do what it takes to handle whatever comes my way,” he explained.
Matt’s motivation is now his son and he plans to instill in him the importance of education by making sure he goes to school every day, helping him with his homework, getting him involved in positive activities and talking to his teachers. He also stressed that he will not hesitate to monitor his friends. Matt emphasizes that Parents are the key to their kid’s success so I cannot and will not let my son down!’

Student 3: Crystal

Crystal (pseudonym) is a 20 year old Cape Verden female who officially dropped out of high school at the age of sixteen. She returned to school at the age of eighteen when her boyfriend advocated for her to attend Whaling City Alternative School with him. Although she did not meet the typical criteria for enrollment at the alternative school (i.e., felony charges), district administrators offered her the opportunity at another chance based on the numerous risk factors in her life.

Crystal is the oldest child of four. For several years she and her siblings lived with their maternal grandmother and uncle. After informing their grandmother that their uncle was initiating inappropriate physical and sexual contact with them, the police were contacted. Crystal recalls the police officer telling her grandmother that she needed to have the uncle leave the house. But instead her grandmother let her uncle stay and decided to allow the Department of Child & Family Services (DCFS) to place all of the children in foster care. As a result of her mother’s substance abuse issues, the children remained in foster care for several years.

During the interview with Crystal she provided great insight into how her life affected her decisions about attending school. She recalls hanging around with much older friends and how she started to act out at the age of thirteen, was not going to school, staying out all night,
smoking, and all kinds of stupid stuff. As she reminisced about that time in her life she spoke with regret stating,

I was ruining my life by not going to school. I hated my life but I didn’t know that the only way for me to have a better life was through education. No one ever told me what I needed to do. I felt stuck in a bad dream.

The following are the messages that she states she will never forget because they made her who she is today (Figure 12):

Crystal states that her decision to drop out of school happened gradually. She explains that she got a job during her freshman year and when extra hours were offered to her she would accept them, even if she knew it would mean she would not be able to get up for school the next
day. As a result of her increasing absences she recalls the work getting more difficult and her motivation to attend school disappeared. Crystal recalled the day she dropped out of New Bedford High School:

I don’t know why I waited to stop going until I turned sixteen. I think I was expecting that dropping out was going to be some big event. It was nothing. I didn’t have to beg or explain to anyone why I was dropping out. It was too easy because no one tried to stop me. I just stopped going and that was it.

When asked what her mother’s response was to her dropping out of school, she stated, I don’t think she felt that she could say anything to me because of everything she had done and put us through. I can see now that she had lost all control of me. Crystal also remembers her mother’s response when she decided to go back to school. She was so proud of me and that made me happy. I saw it in her eyes and that was so motivating to me.

At the time of Crystal’s enrollment at Whaling City, she lived with her mother, her mother’s boyfriend, her three siblings, several other unrelated individuals and three dogs in a two bedroom apartment in New Bedford’s south end. The neighborhood is well known for gang activity and drug sales. No one living in the home was employed and the conditions of the apartment warranted several 51A reports to DCFS.

Crystal performed at the top of her class at Whaling City and served as a role model for her peers, never having received a conduct card. In the summer of 2010 while Crystal was at school, her mother passed away due to unknown causes at the age of 40. This sent her life into complete chaos, with her siblings again being placed in foster care, and her motivation to attend school being disrupted. It was during this difficult time that Crystal acknowledges that:
If it wasn’t for my teachers at Whaling City I wouldn’t have made it. They wouldn’t let me give up and they made sure I kept coming to school, even on the days I didn’t want to. Slowly I became motivated again but I had to tell myself every day that I was going to do it. I wish my mother was here, but at least I know she was proud of me when she passed.

Crystal graduated from the Whaling City Alternative School in 2011. Her Department of Child & Family Services social worker has assisted her in obtaining her own apartment in a quiet neighborhood on the north end of New Bedford. She will also begin taking Early Childhood Education classes at Bristol Community College in September.

Student 4: John

John (pseudonym) is an 18 year old Hispanic male. He is the youngest of five children, all from different biological fathers. He has been raised by his single mother who has a 9th grade education and his older siblings, all who have dropped out of school. His school records indicate that he was administratively transferred to the alternative school from New Bedford High School in his freshman year, after his release from a Department of Youth Services locked facility. John’s criminal charges include: assault and battery with a dangerous weapon, disturbing the peace, possession of Class C substance with intent to distribute. Attendance data from his educational history signifies a chronic pattern of absences since the 4th grade. John has been absent from school over 400 days during his educational years.

John grew up in the west end of New Bedford where he associated himself with much older kids, explaining that he did not pick those friends but rather they were all from his neighborhood and therefore he did not have a choice. He reports he has been gang involved and
has carried a knife or gun since the age of 12. John has been court involved since elementary school for Child In Need of Services (CHINS) for truancy and habitual school offender charges. He has also had repeated delinquency arrests and juvenile court appearances. John has been locked up in the Department of Youth Services facilities several times for the aforementioned criminal charges. According to city police officers, John is known to them and has been considered a CODE 4 (the police code for a person to be considered armed at all times).

John states that he has always considered himself a good kid, even after bringing a knife to school in the sixth grade. He justified his actions because he stated he only brought the knife to school for protection. As a result of this charge he was transferred to the district alternative school for 45 days, but states on his 35th day he got into a fight and was ordered to remain at the school for the rest of the school year. He remembers that he eventually stopped attending school altogether, missing over 100 days that year.

When asked about his mother’s response to his decision to stop attending school, John stated, She would always yell at me but that is just her. When the school stopped calling and telling her that I did this or did that, she didn’t care that I was not going to school. John further explained that, We weren’t that kind of family. I was never encouraged to graduate. We never even talked about it. He added that he received the following similar messages about the lack of expectations others had in him, and as a result he never set high expectations for himself (Figure 13).
John was fifteen years old when representatives from the redesigned alternative school, Whaling City, offered him another chance. He recalls that day saying, I thought it was the cops banging on my door. At that time he reports he was spending all of his time on the streets, picking up more charges and trying to avoid being shot by rival gang members. Something in the back of my mind was telling me I should listen to the guy at my door who was telling me I should go back to school. John stated he made the decision to return to school because deep down inside he always wanted to do well and have a better life. Two months later he was sitting in a classroom at Whaling City, completing courses to earn his high school diploma.

When asked to talk about his thoughts about parents being the cause of students not going to school he did not hesitate in his response.
When kids are young and in elementary school it is absolutely their parents' fault if they don't go to school. But from middle school on, it is all about their friends because that is where the pressure is coming from. I could sit here and blame my mother, I did for a real long time, but at the end of the day it's all on me because I made the decision to do the things I did, not my mother.

John adds that, “I had to make school an expectation for myself and if I didn’t, no one else would have and feels that if he had not built strong relationships, been supported every day by staff and experienced success at Whaling City he has no doubt that he would have given up and would be in jail today. He suggests, “even if some kids fight it in the beginning it is because they are scared they will fail, but everyone wants to feel special and feel like they belong to something good.” John stresses that there is no easy answer to explain why kids do not attend school, and teachers “need to look at each individual student’s needs because every kid has their own life they have to go back to after school and some of their lives are really bad. The way to engage one kid may not work with another.”

**School Factors**

In recent years an emerging body of research suggests that the school system’s structure continues to be influential in generating absenteeism and other forms of student rebellion (Bahr, 1999; Soloman & Palmer, 2004; Balfanz, 2007; Henry, 2008). Corville-Smith’s (1995) research suggests that schools often blame their poor attendance rates on individual students who are chronically absent, rather than consider what they may or may not be doing to cause the problem. Under this theme of school factors several categories emerged from various participant groups: school climate, student-teacher relationships, and school policies such as attendance and
discipline. The first section illustrates how the staff talks about the social reality of the students they teach and how they explain their role in the students' lives.

Staff from the Whaling City Alternative High School (WCAS) voiced their frustration regarding their limited influence on the lives of their students:

> We (school staff) are competing with TV, video games, friends and the streets. These kids want instant gratification. And it is the negative role models that can provide them with that — drug dealers and gang leaders. I can't compete with them when the kids are not in school, when they are not with me (Mr. Wallis).

Ms. Jones, a teacher at WCAS added that these kids are looking to fit in, to be accepted and feel love — what these kids really want has nothing to do with education — not at this point in their lives. When asked what the school can do to make a difference in these kids' lives outside of school, she suggested the problems these kids have are bigger than us, bigger than what the schools can fix.

**Perceived Responsibilities of Staff**

During the WCAS teacher focus group discussion, several staff discussed the school's responsibility in supporting families. Everyone agreed it would be more beneficial for everyone to get more parents on board, but their comments illustrated the difficulty to do so at the secondary level. For example Mr. Alves explained that the parents' phone numbers change frequently which makes it difficult for him to attempt communication. Although several staff acknowledged they too feel a certain level of frustration, they insisted that more could be done to educate the parents and encourage their involvement, thus ultimately benefiting the students.

Ms. Masty stated:
I think if the parents need help, we should at least offer it to them and hopefully that will also help the kids. Maybe it would help if we went into the neighborhoods and into their homes and talked to them about the importance of education and getting their kids to school. We expect that they know these things, but maybe they don't.

Staff agreed the lack of parental support is a real problem, and although they conceded that they do not have much control over such situations, they continued to suggest that schools can do more. One teacher suggested, "We have to start in our classrooms. We have to make school a place where these kids would rather be. We may be their only chance."

**School Climate**

Teacher survey data provided a general description of how teachers at New Bedford High School view the school's climate. Based on the survey data, it appears that despite efforts of staff at New Bedford High School, the school is not providing a climate which provides enough safety and support to engage all students and support their attendance. This survey data indicate that while half (51%) of teacher respondents agree that New Bedford High School is a safe school; 30% disagree; and 19% are unsure. Further inquiry uncovered that 86% of the respondents feel students fight a lot; 54% agree students carry guns or knives; and 83% of teachers claim they address bullying situations at least one time per month.

In fact, several anonymous respondents provided the following perceptions about their students at New Bedford High School and how it impacts the climate in their classrooms:

1) "Many students are not motivated, are lazy and are looking for a place to lay their heads down."
2) The students who are failing do not want to do anything, and they say they are assigned too much work. They do not know what work is; and

3) Students are not equipped with the proper social or emotional skills to achieve success.

When asked about the importance of school climate and what the schools can do to make a difference in the student’s lives, the responsibility expressed by the staff at Whaling City for ensuring these kids experience success was overwhelming. Ms. Walker explained:

It’s about us being able to reach them and engage each one of them. If we don’t do it for them then who will? We all have to be animated and change the way we do things. School needs to be entertaining and fun, but at the same time safe for these kids.

The staff believe that the receipt of instant gratification some students receive from dealing and doing drugs, partying, money, sex and gangs is much more motivating to them than sitting in a classroom for 180 days learning about strategies to pass the MCAS exam.

Teacher – Student Relationships

The following conversation between several New Bedford High School students regarding their teachers explain our youth’s perceptions regarding the school’s climate.

Student 1: Honestly, I like some substitute teachers here more than my regular teachers. They actually talk to you and have a conversation.

Student 2: Yeah, I feel closer to some substitute teachers too. It would help if our everyday teachers knew our names.
Student 3: Some teachers just don’t know how to talk to us. And they are so set in their ways. I hear teachers tell kids all the time, Why are you even here? and What’s the point of coming in?

Student 1: Some teachers will never change. They need training. Some teachers have no control over their class and they cannot handle it. There are only like 50% of the teachers who are good.

Student 4: And all of the teachers should try to help us with our work, it should be a requirement. And they should ask us how our day is going and treat us like people.

The students’ responses indicate their desire to have positive relationships with their teachers, even if it means something as simple as a greeting or a mention of their name. A 9th grade student offered the following suggestion to teachers at the high school: Instead of being so negative, why can’t they say something encouraging or maybe asking Can I help you? I think this would work much better.

High school administrator 1 stated, We have good teachers and we have not so good teachers, just like with anything. High school administrator 2 offered that the good teachers do the following things consistently: 1) build relationships with all of their students; 2) reach disengaged students, 3) incorporate fun into their lessons, and 4) know how to talk to adolescents without setting them off.

Building relationships with at risk kids is a key factor. It is no guarantee but if a teacher can reach out to the most disengaged kids and somehow let them know that they care, and that connection may get them into the class providing an
opportunity to eventually work on their academics é after you sort through all their baggage é it is a lot of hard, hard work (Administrator 1).

**Perspectives of Participants on New Bedford High School and Whaling City Alternative**

Without the encouragement from their family or peers, many at-risk youth ūjust give up.ū That is unless they are fortunate enough to form a positive relationship with a teacher or other school staff. The students at Whaling City have a unique perspective in relation to whether this is true and how school factors affect a student’s desire or motivation to attend school; as they have experienced firsthand what it is like to attend both New Bedford High School and Whaling City Alternative High School.

The following conversation with these students provided great insight to the researcher. It is important to remember that these students were once disengaged and thought to be ūunfixable.ū But clearly, as their responses show throughout this focus group they are now mature, insightful, and engaged in learning.

Student 2: My teachers at NBHS never told me to come to school. Not like here at Whaling City where everyone tells me to come to school.

Student 1: Teachers at the high school need to put more effort into kids. That’s why I came back to school because like my friends, my teachers and the attendance officer is always calling me and telling me to get to school.

Student 4: I think the teachers here are incredible ūI mean I have never seen it anywhere but here at Whaling City ū the teachers motivate you to come to school.
Student 1: Whaling City staff come to your house, they knock on your door, call to check on you during the weekend and the attendance officer will come to get you up to go to school. He will even rip the covers off you. I've never seen that at other schools.

Student 1: There is more motivation, the teachers help you, they give you more attention, and they really care. When I am absent I feel like I am missing something and I am letting people who care about me down.

Student 2: I think Whaling City is safer than the high school. Even with all the gang activity going on in the city, a lot of kids feel safe here regardless of what part of the city they come from.

Student 3: I have heard teachers at NBHS tell kids that they don't care! They say, "I've got my education. I'm still getting paid. I don't care if you are here or not!"

Ms. Santiago (parent) stated in her interview that both of her sons attended both the New Bedford High School and Whaling City Alternative School, and she offered a unique parent's perspective regarding the differences between the climate and teacher's role in the two schools. She compared New Bedford High School to college in that the teachers do not care if the students attend their class or not. She states she has heard a teacher say, "I receive my check whether your child is here or not!" In contrast to that experience, she claims her children were treated much different at Whaling City. "It is much different there (Whaling City) because it is small and they can supervise the kids. The teachers know what the kids need and know how to give it to them."

When asked what she would tell New Bedford High School teachers if she had the opportunity, she replied: "You all need to realize that these kids have too much bad stuff
happening to them outside of school. They have too much on their minds to pay attention and too many choices to make and sometimes the bad choices they make are a lot easier for them than sitting in school all day. Teachers are the key to changing these kids’ lives for the better!

When teachers at WCAS were asked how staff at NBHS could be more engaging, they offered very simple ideas that they believe makes a world of difference: Get to know them and treat them with respect, praise them, encourage them with your words and actions, have fun, friendly competitions, do fun hands-on activities. One staff member summed up the discussion by saying, We cannot expect perfection from them. We have to make sure we take each little success that they experience, add them up and celebrate them so they are left wanting more!

Ms. Santiago (parent) acknowledges that kids in today’s society can be tough, difficult and think they are grown. She described how a teacher’s lack of understanding of what these kids’ lives are really like will hamper relationships and obstruct improvements in the school’s climate. If the teachers don’t really know what is happening in their lives and going on in the streets, and then they talk to them rough, how can they expect the kids to respond positively? She then surmised the following: This is why some of these kids don’t care about school. Because nobody cares about them and whether they go to school, so why should they? Ms. Santiago stated that she believes if teachers took the time to get to know the kids and understand them, there would be less problems in their classrooms.
Other Factors that Contribute to Low Student Attendance

School Structure & Safety

A structural issue that impacts the staff’s ability to monitor all of the students is that New Bedford High School is a very large school that spans over a quarter mile in length. There are approximately forty doors that are locked only from the outside due to fire codes; providing easy escapes for any student who wishes to leave. According to the attendance officers, this too impacts the safety of the students and the school. Attendance Officer Norton stated:

We know there are hundreds of students absent every day, but we also know there are some who come in and sign into homeroom and then leave. So we have a 14-year-old student who is marked present in our books but who is actually out running around on the streets. That is a huge safety issue for the district.

Attendance Officer Woodson, who is also an alumni of New Bedford High Schools suggests this is a historical issue, “That was a problem when I was there in the late 80’s because I used to do it, it still hasn’t been fixed.”

The administrators acknowledged the ease to which students can leave the high school without being approached by staff. It was explained by Administrator 1 how skipping behavior occurs as the result of three main reasons: 1) there are not enough staff to monitor the vast areas of the high school, 2) because of the building’s size, every door is part of an emergency exit plan and cannot be locked from the inside; and 3) staff are afraid to confront students. One NBHS student confirmed this problem:
It is easier to skip at the high school than the middle school because in middle school there were teachers all around and they cared. Here (New Bedford High School) the doors are all unlocked, there is a lot of freedom and you can walk right out and no one will try to stop you. I’ve seen it happen a million times. It’s like you come to high school and you expect the teachers to give you more. But they say Oh if you walk out I’m going to write you up but they don’t try to stop us or talk to us about it; it is a safety issue.

The acknowledged fear of some teachers was explored further with the administrators. They admit that it is very difficult and once you have that element where the staff is afraid to engage the kids, we are in trouble.

Attendance Officer Sutton stated, There is a real lack of security at the high school and the hallways are scary. Teachers cannot even teach. One suggestion provided by the high school attendance officers to help reinstate safety in the school is to redeploy the school resource officers and insist on their presence in the hallways. Just the police officers presence is important. If kids knew they were all over the school at all times, they may think twice.

According to the high school attendance officers, student factors such as insubordinate behaviors, blatant disrespect for adults and their disinterest of school can negatively affect the teachers’ willingness to support these disengaged students, and can make positive relationships difficult, if not impossible. In fact, they describe student behavior and attitude as a key component creating fear in the staff and causing the poor school climate at the high school.
I see it every day. I see a group of kids in the hallways after the bell rings so I ask them where they should be and I get no response… so I ask again and they tell me 

\[
\text{&amp;** you! } \text{&amp; get off our D***s! } \text{&amp; you want to get banged (punched) out?}\]

these kids are verbally threatening and I am only one guy, what am I going to do? I am afraid for some of our female teachers (Attendance Officer Sutton).

**School Attendance Policy**

New Bedford High School administrators offered insightful dialogue regarding reasons for non-attendance. Administrator 1 stated, ‘The current school attendance policy isn’t horrible, we just don’t enforce it.’ He admits the lack of adherence to the policy has added to the culture that actually attending school is not important:

This year we presented the policy to the students and told them they would lose credit if they missed a certain number of days; we had the best attendance rates in history. That quickly changed when seniors who violated the policy, walked across the stage and got their diploma anyway. The message got out very quickly that the policy didn’t really matter and don’t worry about because you will still graduate and the attendance dropped the following year.

Administrator 2, who recently came to NBHS from an area suburban high school, stated that he believed adhering to the attendance policy could really help the students who basically come from good families, do their work, but don’t necessarily have to sit in class in order to pass. He was not sure if adhering to the policy would improve their ability to effectively work with students who have a long history of non-attendance. His apprehension stemmed regarding a
student who has missed so much school over the years that they are academically not prepared for the high school.

**Suspension Policy**

The use of suspension is incredibly frustrating for the attendance officers who described how they are working to keep at-risk students in school, encouraging students who have an excessive number of days absent to come back and setting up interventions such as counseling. If they are late to school and get suspended for three days. Another attendance officer offered, Or they suspend a student because they went to the wrong cafeteria or were late to class. Are you kidding me? I know everyone is overwhelmed but come on we need to find more viable options. The data indicates the removal of disruptive students is one of the primary interventions used at New Bedford High School to maintain order and safety.

New Bedford High School’s out-of-school suspension rate is alarming. According to the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education school report card for the 2010-2011 school year, New Bedford High School’s out-of-school suspension rate is 34.8%, compared to 12.7% district-wide and the state’s rate of 6%. Clearly, the use of suspension at the high school level and discipline policies are not seen as effective, as it appears to not only directly impact the attendance rate, but also exacerbates the disengagement process for many students (Blumenthal, 2008).

Students from New Bedford High School also offered suspension as a reason why students may disengage and do not attend school. According to the students, the main reasons why students are suspended at New Bedford High School are for fighting and skipping classes or
school altogether. Another student stated that some students get suspended on purpose to get out of having to come to school.

The need for alternatives to suspension was supported by students at Whaling City because indoor suspension makes sense because kids would have to do their work and wouldn’t fall behind (Steven, Whaling City Student). Attendance Officer Norton further stressed the district’s need to be more flexible and have more options. Right now we are limited and it is a recipe for disaster.

Summary

The data collected for purposes of this study from students, teachers, attendance officers, administrators, parents has assisted the researcher in exploring the obstacles to attending school that many of New Bedford’s at risk youth face. It is evident from this research that there is no single explanation as to why students do not attend school regularly and eventually drop out of school. Although each student’s story may be unique, the reasons for their chronic absenteeism can be categorized in four very broad, yet specific factors: community factors, family factors, student factors, and school factors.

While some responses were found to be consistent across all participant groups, other experiences and beliefs simultaneously emerged among individuals that illustrated different perspectives and lent to the richness of the data collected. Such varying perspectives included: 1) the role and responsibility of each participant group in regards to a student’s chronic absenteeism 2) the schools’ responsibility to provide services to parents and 3) how to engage at-risk students who appear unmotivated. On the other hand, commonalities among the participants included: 1) parent involvement and encouragement is the key to children’s success; 2) positive
relationships between students and teachers are vital to the success of at-risk youth; 3) adolescent student motivation is contingent upon the receipt of instant gratification; 4) societal issues in New Bedford are strong deterrents to school attendance and school success; and 5) at-risk youth require positive messages about attendance and education from every direction (i.e., school, parents, peers and social networks).
Chapter 5
Discussion of Findings and Implications for Educational Practice

Introduction

It is no easy task to improve school attendance rates in a poor urban school district in today’s world. However, based on the findings of this study, the New Bedford Public Schools is attempting to do just that. This chapter presents a summary of the study and important conclusions drawn from the literature review, theoretical framework and data presented in Chapter IV. The researcher will provide a discussion of the implications for action, the development of the New Bedford Public School’s Where Are YOU Headed? school attendance and graduation initiative, as well as recommendations for further research.

Overview of the Problem

The enormity and prevalence of chronically absent students concentrated in urban areas across the United States is pervasive and has become an assumed norm (Adelman & Taylor, 2011). New Bedford High School has not met the 92% requirement for the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001 Annual Yearly Progress (AYP) school attendance measure in more than ten years. Additionally, over 250 students drop out of the New Bedford Public Schools every year. From this viewpoint, not attending school and eventually dropping out of school may be a signal of the declining influence of traditional pro-education institutions such as family and schools.

The decline of these positive influences may be the result of our youth formulating their own codes of behavior that are influenced on a higher level by the streets and their peers. This exploratory analysis showed the power and influence they had on the at-risk student participants
of New Bedford, which contributed to the onset and continuance of their non-attendance. Of equal importance, all of the students interviewed had relatives, parents and friends who did not graduate from high school, perhaps reinforcing the idea that attending and graduating from school was not a valued experience in the home of these students.

Schools cannot control all factors which negatively impact school attendance. In fact, on a daily basis school staff has control over a relatively small segment of their students’ lives. Therefore, school staff must make the most of the time they do spend with our students to ensure their needs are being met, they understand the importance of education and they are motivated to attend and learn. In order to maximize the schools’ efforts to educate our students, we must encourage them to be in attendance each and every day. Addressing the multifaceted needs of New Bedford’s highest risk students cannot be done by the classroom teacher alone. It takes a district-wide effort which addresses the district’s organizational policy and procedures, students’ needs and motivational readiness, communication and outreach with families, the schools’ climate and the district’s belief that school attendance is the foundation for student achievement.

The following conversation with the high risk student participants was enlightening to the researcher. They paint a vivid picture of their own experiences and the feelings that teachers and staff at both New Bedford High School and Whaling City Alternative High School elicit in them. These responses illustrate an increase in maturity, insight, and an understanding of the importance of education and engagement in learning.

Student 1: When I was at the high school, the teachers basically told me that I couldn’t do it. If kids want to sit there and do nothing, the teachers will let them just sit there and do nothing. And if that has been allowed since your freshman year and teachers just tell you everything that is wrong with you É you start to believe it and then you don’t care É and then you drop out.
Student 2: My teachers at NBHS never told me to come to school. Not like here at Whaling City where everyone tells me to come to school.

Student 3: The kids at NBHS think that by sitting with their head down or walking out of class they are hurting the teacher, but they are hurting themselves and they don’t get it yet.

Student 2: I know kids at NBHS who drop out and never go back. I know kids here at Whaling City who dropped out and they come back just because of the support they get from the teachers.

Student 1: There is more motivation, the teachers help you, they give you more attention, and they really care. When I am absent I feel like I am missing something and I am letting people who care about me down.

The researcher asked the focus group participants to participate in free thinking and say the first word they think of that describes both the comprehensive high school and the alternative high school (Figure 14).

Figure 14: Descriptive comparisons of two schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>New Bedford High School</th>
<th>Whaling City Alternative High School</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Too big!</td>
<td>Motivational!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Wack!</td>
<td>A Life Saver!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative!</td>
<td>Amazing!</td>
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<tr>
<td>Terrible!</td>
<td>The Best!</td>
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<td>Discouraging!</td>
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</table>
Purpose of the Study

This practice-based research study is one piece of a multi-dimensional effort to improve students’ school attendance in New Bedford, Massachusetts. The overarching goal of this research was to conduct a case study of the New Bedford Public Schools that would result in an innovative district-wide school attendance improvement initiative. The researcher explored the following questions in order to gather information from students, parents, teachers, attendance officers and school administrators to help explain the chronic absenteeism rates in the New Bedford Public Schools: (1) How do different participants in the NBPS system explain the chronic absenteeism of students, and their own role in improving student attendance? And (2) Why do at-risk students in New Bedford choose to be absent from school and what do they believe would motivate them to attend school regularly?

Interpretation of Findings Based on the Literature Review

The literature review and findings of this study consistently showed that the reasons chronically absent students do not attend school in New Bedford and other urban districts across the country falls into four broad categories: community, family, student and school. Despite the commonalities regarding the reasons why, the findings of this study confirm the combinations and configurations of the factors may be unique for each and every at-risk student, therefore requiring a different menu of supportive approaches and interventions.

All of the at-risk students who participated in this study described being disengaged and not liking school at some point in their lives (most commonly at the secondary level). They indicated they would have been more motivated to attend school if the following things would have happened consistently throughout their lives: 1) their parents encouraged and expected
them to attend every day, 2) their teachers cared and encouraged them to attend every day, and 3) their peers went to school regularly and encouraged them to attend every day. After an extensive review of the literature, Fredricks, Blumenfeld and Paris (2004) concluded: ‘Engagement is associated with positive academic outcomes, including achievement and persistence in school’ (p.2). Conversely, for many at-risk students, disengagement is too often associated with poor attendance, failing grades and behavior problems that often lead to negative relationships with staff and eventually the student dropping out of school. From a psychologically motivational perspective, disengagement from classroom learning is associated with threats to feelings of competence and self-worth; and may result in internalized behaviors (e.g. boredom, emotional distress, anger) and/or externalized behaviors (e.g. disrespect, misbehavior, non-attendance) (Adelman & Taylor, 2011). Several students in both the focus groups and interviews described ‘not caring’ about school and feeling ‘hopeless’ about the direction their lives were heading.

The majority of students who participated in this study admitted they were not aware as they were growing up, that daily school attendance was important or connected to their grades and the likelihood of them graduating from high school. Other students who had some understanding that to some extent school attendance was important, failed to realize their goals and dreams could be better achieved by attending school and graduating from high school. It appears from the findings of this study there is often a limited understanding of the importance of education of at-risk students in New Bedford. The student participants stated that education was not a priority in their homes. Moreover, exactly how non-attendance leads to dropping out of school and why dropping out of school leads to diminished employment opportunities, poverty and possible homelessness were never discussed with them at all.
Reducing chronic absence is especially important for children living in poverty, who need as much time as possible in a literacy-rich, engaging learning environment during the early years to set them on a path toward academic success and third grade reading proficiency (Attendance Works, 2011, p.3).

New Bedford students’ responses echoed some of those students’ perspectives from the literature regarding the school level reasons for absenteeism. The most commonly shared reasons given were: 1) lack of encouragement from home, 2) lack of positive relationships with teachers, 3) falling behind in their work, 4) frequent suspensions and 5) failing grades. The at-risk students from the Whaling City Alternative School gave more personally connected reasons why they did not attend school regularly including their parents’ lack of involvement in their lives, peer pressure, the pressure from the streets and gangs, and the overall lack of understanding the importance of their education. The literature clearly supported that chronic absenteeism is a strong and reliable predictor of participation in self-defeating and life threatening behaviors such as gangs, crime and drugs (Fredricks, et.al, 2004; Furger, 2008; Hammond, Smink & Drew, 2007).

Because it is often difficult for teachers and administrators who have been raised with middle class values and high expectations for educational success, to understand and fully appreciate the meaning and extent of the deprivation some of our students experience (Reid, 1999); their lack of empathy can play a role in their willingness to engage with at-risk students. Therefore, we must provide teachers with more relevant professional development and real-life opportunities to understand their students and the lives they live, and how their life may negatively impact their ability, desire and motivation to attend school daily. Only then can
teachers develop meaningful strategies to address the risk factors their students may experience. And only then can they understand how very different each student’s story is, and how they require very different means of support.

The responses from the sole parent participant support the research findings from studies which examine parents’ perspectives. For the most part the studies show parents want what is best for their children and do understand that education is important (Bridgeland, et.al., 2006). It was clear through this researcher’s discussion with the parent participant that she did care about her children’s education; but being a single parent she lacks the support of a spouse, she cannot control what her children do when they leave her home, and so she relies on the police to support her maintain some sense of parental control.

However, the lack of participation by the other students’ parents contradicts what the research suggests. Although this researcher requested their participation in the study through mail, phone calls, requests from their own children and in all cases either offered them transportation or offered to do the interview in their home, no other parents participated. Their lack of involvement in this study supports the students’ perspectives that their parents do not value their education and are not involved in their educational lives.

Consistent with the literature were comments from teachers, attendance officers and administrators in the New Bedford Public Schools which described the lack of support and lack of expectations for daily school attendance and graduation from the parents is a major contributing factor to why students do not attend school. One teacher from New Bedford High School stated, “Students are for the most part a product of their home environment and education starts in the home. If they do not get the message early, it is too late by the time they get to high
school. Matt (student interview participant) supported that thought and stated, “Kids who don’t attend school and drop out do not have the needed support from their family. That is where it needs to come from first!” Although the research states that students have revealed they dropped out because school was boring and irrelevant to their lives; New Bedford teachers and staff believe that it is more due to the consequences of non-attendance: low reading ability, gaps in learning and a lack of understanding the information due to poor study and homework habits. As Buchman and Seligman (1995) suggest, it may also be the student attributing their lack of understanding to the teacher’s inability to teach or not caring, rather than their own deficits as a result of not attending the class regularly.

The research and findings revealed the most common responses for chronic absenteeism across the country are punitive; and often work against enhancing student engagement. School districts often incorporate the use of consequences such as suspension, which often exacerbates the student’s absenteeism from school and even increases the likelihood the student will drop out due to course failure, or loss of credit. For example, one student focus group participant stated, “Indoor suspension makes so much more sense because the more days you miss, the further behind you get.” The student participants explained through their own experiences how not attending school regularly actually resulted in their desire and/or decision to drop out of school. The students agreed with what the research tells us, there is a vicious cycle of non-attendance and dropping out. That is, their decision to eventually drop out of school could have been predicted early in their educational careers based on their chronic absenteeism patterns.

Unfortunately, as Finn (1987) states, this research is limited in examining this cycle in relation to the known risk factors because school districts do not maintain such historical data on individual students, supporting the need for organizational revisions on policy and procedures for
addressing chronic absenteeism. Therefore, improvement policies and practices need immediate revision to correct such deficiencies. Districts must not only use outcomes data and attendance date to target schools, grades and even individual students; they must also value the insight and ideas of their students to help design effective supports and programs.

**Interpretation of the Findings Based on the Theoretical Framework**

Organization and motivation theories have provided a lens for: 1) inquiring into why students do not attend school in New Bedford, 2) what is motivating to at-risk students in New Bedford, 3) reviewing the roles and responsibilities of staff as they pertain to school attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools, 4) reviewing policies and procedures for addressing chronic absenteeism of students in the district, 5) developing a district-wide initiative to address school attendance at every level and 6) developing a comprehensive and integrated approach to meeting the needs of at-risk youth in order to effectively address daily school attendance and increases students’ ability to reach graduation.

**Organization Theory**

Organization theory is the study of internal designs, structures, relationships with the external environment and the behavior of leaders and staff within the organization (Nirenberg, 1978; Bolman & Deal, 2003). The school level factors associated with student absenteeism are sometimes the hardest to address because it includes historical practices and traditions, thousands of individual personalities and beliefs about what at-risk students deserve and do not deserve, and inconsistency in fidelity of efforts, lack of buy-in and even sabotage of attempts at change. Bolman and Deal (2003) suggest organizations utilize such data to design a comprehensive approach to designing solutions.
There is little research available regarding how or when to address student persistence in school because there is no one, common solution (Christensen, et.al, 2001). Although no successful, data-driven, comprehensive programs to improve school attendance could be found in the literature, several authors have made broad strategies for what should be included in such a program. For example, Bridgeland, Dilulio and Balfanz (2009) recommend districts prioritize efforts to develop a comprehensive approach to combating absenteeism by: 1) collecting accurate and relevant data, 2) setting high expectations around school attendance for all students, 3) communicate the district’s commitment to improving school attendance and 4) creating alternative learning environments for at-risk students. Zinn (2008) suggested the importance of incorporating fun, creative thinking and student empowerment into the district’s efforts. Epstein and Sheldon (2002) further stressed the importance of: 1) involving parents and the community, 2) using more positive involvement activities than negative or punishing ones and 3) sustaining a focus on improving school attendance over time.

Most of the prevailing policy and practice in the New Bedford Public Schools has not yet effectively dealt with the necessity to enhance the school experience for unengaged, at-risk students at the high school level. In regards to the district’s use of consequences for non-attendance, the majority of student participants stated the current process and procedures are not effective. They stated that suspensions did not change non-attending behavior and in fact often gave them the desired outcome they were seeking; being able to stay home. Several Whaling City students stated they had “absolutely no fear of the consequences” for violating the school attendance policy and did not consider not attending school as a serious problem. Students from the Whaling City High School suggested the schools utilize more in-school consequences which
mandated students to complete their work and avoid falling behind in their courses (which they
described as a major reason why their absenteeism patterns continued).

The research conducted for the National Center for School Engagement (2010), indicates
that attendance policies and practices that effectively deal with chronic absenteeism share five
key components:

1. Education of parents regarding school attendance requirements;

2. Effective policies and practices to monitor attendance;

3. Clear definition of excessive absenteeism and a two stage response to excessive absences;

4. A Stage One response in which schools investigate underlying problems and respond
   with changes in school services and linkages to community services; and

5. A Stage Two response in which additional help is sought through the Department of
   Child & Family Services (DCFS) and the Juvenile Court System.

These components confirm the attendance officers’ statements regarding the severity of the
family dysfunction requires the intervention of social services agencies to address the issues for
which the schools have no control over (e.g., domestic violence, substance abuse, neglect, etc).

Motivation Theory

Optimal learning requires a student to be in attendance at school each day. It also
requires a student to have ‘motivational readiness.’ The absence of such readiness can cause
and/or maintain problems with student’s level of engagement and persistence (Adelman &
Taylor, 2011). In an effort to make students more aware of the causal attributions and
explanations of why things occur, for example failing grades; and how attending school every
day can help them to improve their grades is important for their future success. According to
Buchman and Seligman (1995), when learners succeed at an academic task, they are likely to attribute this success to their own efforts and abilities; but when they fail, they will want to attribute their failure to factors over which they have no control, such as bad teaching or an uncaring, unfair teacher. If this is true for at-risk students in New Bedford, it is extremely important for the district’s teachers, administrators and support staff to help them learn to develop an understanding of the connection between attending school daily, achieving academically, and graduating from high school.

“Students who manifest learning, behavior and emotional problems usually are not motivationally ready and able to pursue non-personalized instructional practices”(Adelman & Taylor, 2011, p.6). The National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine (2004) further confirms what the student participants in this study explained:

Motivation decreases steadily from the early grades of elementary school into high school. Furthermore, adolescents are too old and too independent to follow teachers’ demands out of obedience, and many are too young, inexperienced or uniformed to fully appreciate the value of succeeding in school (p.1).

Student participants explained the difficulty of the transition between middle school and high school, the increasing peer pressure, the continued lack of support from their parents and how they progressively lost interest in attending school at all. Fredricks, et.al., (2004) state that this loss of interest in school is psychological and associated with threats to the student’s feeling of competence and self-determination(p.2).

As explained by the co-directors of the Center for Mental Health in Schools, our expectations regarding our innate abilities are often influenced by our past experiences; and other
times from the messages we received from others (parents, peers, teachers, etc.) (Adelman & Taylor, 2011). This concept may help to explain the students’ lack of motivation and predisposition toward non-attending behavior, chronic behavioral problems, criminal activity and dropping out of school. As previously discussed in Chapter IV, the messages that the student participants receive from outside influences clearly affect their beliefs about themselves, their persistence towards graduation and their beliefs about the importance of education and attending school (Reid, 1982; Hardre, 2003; Ryan & Deci, 2009).

Other motivational aspects that may explain why students in New Bedford have patterns of chronic absenteeism is Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs. The theory states that individuals are motivated to satisfy a number of different needs, some of which are more powerful than others (Maslow, 1943). It was clear from several student participants who were interviewed, that their basic needs for love and security from their parents or families have been lacking from the beginning. One attendance officer confirmed the students’ statements when he suggested that the schools provide elementary aged students with food, shelter, heat and attention, often why the school attendance rates are high at the elementary level. However, adolescent’s needs are much different and as a result many of them turned to a place where their needs were met and their self-esteem improved. Unfortunately, it is no longer school for many of these students but instead, the streets and gangs.

Many students at both New Bedford High School and Whaling City Alternative High School described their desire to have more positive relationships with both their parents and teachers. This speaks to their need for love and security as motivating factors that could possibly combat their non-attendance behavior. Maslow’s (1943) theory of self-actualization, or the desire to become more and everything one is capable of becoming (p.374) was evident
throughout the students' responses. As Matt stated during his interview, “I always wanted to better myself. I really wanted to be successful.” But he stressed this evolution in his thinking and increased maturity was gradual and came from repeated positive messages from his parents and teachers at Whaling City Alternative High School; counteracting all the negative messages from the streets. It is interesting how the students' accounts illustrated how self-actualization evolves with an at-risk student's age and maturity. Yet, self-actualization it is still not always strong enough to be the impetus for changing or combating all the other risk factors they experience. Matt stated, “That is when you have to remove yourself from the bad influences completely. Those that cannot or are not willing to leave New Bedford, will never fully be free from the pull of the streets in New Bedford.”

**Practitioner Significance**

This researcher immediately knew she wanted to conduct research that would address a real issue in the New Bedford Public Schools and allow her the opportunity to use the research and data to design programs and interventions to improve school attendance and decrease the number of students who drop out of school in the district. Ultimately, the New Bedford Public Schools’ *Where Are YOU Headed?* comprehensive initiative addresses and/or accomplishes all of these research-based suggestions. Each component of the initiative includes different activities designed to promote public awareness, educate stakeholders, provide engaging activities and programs, and encourage healthy competition, all in an effort to improve school attendance. The concept behind each competition or event is to use a balance of extrinsic motivators that may help to meet some students' basic needs (e.g., food, clothing, special attention from their favorite teacher, etc); as well as increase their intrinsic motivation by experiencing success each day they attend school. This work conducted in the New Bedford
Public Schools, as a result of this study, can be shared and therefore be useful to other urban districts with similar student demographics.

**The Where Are YOU Headed? School Attendance and Graduation Initiative**

The question asked in the title of the initiative (Where Are YOU Headed?) indicates there is somewhere to go or something more to do in one’s life (e.g. graduation, college). And the follow up statement (The Decision is Yours!) stresses individual students’ responsibility to make decisions that will affect their lives either positively or negatively. For example, if a student is headed to medical school to become a doctor, they must make the decisions to attend school every day, take extra science courses, get excellent grades, etc. Conversely, if a student makes the decision to not attend school daily or to engage in behavior that may result from exclusion from school, they must accept the consequences that come with those decisions (e.g., dropout, jail, poverty).

This Where Are YOU Headed? initiative supports a push towards self-determination and self-actualization, because according to Adelman & Taylor (2011), “people seem to value thinking or feeling that they have some degree of choice and freedom in deciding what to do” (p.8). The initiative has utilized the extant literature regarding school attendance and dropout prevention, insight from the study’s participants, and the findings from this study to create innovative ways to teach our students and parents the connection between school attendance, doing well academically and graduating. In creating this major shift for addressing school attendance from a more punitive manner using detention, suspension and the juvenile court system to change students’ behavior, the district is moving towards a more positive and proactive
approach. In doing so, the district as a whole must remain diligent in setting expectations for all students to attend school every day.

**How the Initiative Began**

In October 2009, this researcher in her role of Assistant Superintendent gathered students from the alternative high school and teachers to develop a campaign to decrease the number of students who skip school. At our first meeting, one insightful young man stated, “Miss, when you see them skipping you have to ask them, ‘Where you headed?’ Everyone around the table paused and that is how the *Where Are YOU Headed?* school attendance and graduation initiative was born. The initiative started with several two minute public service announcements which featured either an individual who attends school regularly or graduated and the opportunities they have in life (e.g. varsity football player headed to his game, a NBHS graduate who is now an area doctor heading to care for a patient); or an individual who did not attend school regularly and dropped out of school and the consequences they are living with now (e.g. a homeless female heading to look for a home or a young male at the house of correction heading back to his jail cell).

In January 2010 a young man approached this researcher during a visit to the high school. He said, “Miss, I have seen the *Where Are YOU Headed?* commercials. Me (DaeDae) and my boy Kaotique (pronounced Chaotic) can write you a song. Because I would never want to hinder a student’s creative energy, I agreed. Two days later I received a phone call informing me that the students had completed writing and performing the song in Kaotique’s basement. Not knowing what to expect and just praying that it was appropriate I went to the high school to listen to the song. As soon as the song began I was giving high fives to the boys because I
knew what they had created was very special. We immediately started working on developing a music video with the assistance of the high school’s TV Production teacher.

In May of 2010 the music video was completed. The video featured two seniors from New Bedford High School, Daedae and Kaotique, performing the song while a senior from the Whaling City Alternative High School (John) played the role of the young minority male trying to decide where he is heading in life. The video was a city-wide success and galvanized the district’s mission to improve school attendance in New Bedford, Massachusetts. In December 2010 the three, at-risk minority New Bedford males were telling their story to a crowd at the Inspired by Hope Gala in Orlando, Florida, and received a standing ovation from the likes of Dr. Ben Carson, world renowned neurological surgeon from John Hopkins Medical Center.

Figure 15: 2009-2010 Where Are YOU Headed? (WAYH?) Activities (See Appendix for Descriptions and Examples*)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marketing &amp; Education</th>
<th>Special Events</th>
<th>Programs</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>2009 - The WAYH? Campaign was introduced to the administration, school committee and principals. 2009 - Public Service Announcements (PSAs) were created by students and staff to educate the community of both the positive and negative consequences of not attending school and dropping out. The PSAs are featured on the local cable television station, YouTube and the New Bedford Public Schools’ website</td>
<td>2010 - Debut of the Where Are YOU Headed? song and music video written and performed by three seniors in the New Bedford Public Schools Students performed the song live at half-time of a varsity basketball game</td>
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Posters with the individuals featured in the first PSAs are distributed to all schools

The NBPSWhere Are YOU Headed? initiative was highlighted at Inspired By Hope Gala – in Orlando, Florida

Where is the Initiative Now?

All three of these young men from New Bedford, MA graduated from high school in June 2010. Quinn (Kaotique) graduated #4 in a class of over six hundred students and now attends Worcester Polytechnical Institute. David (DaeDae) who grew up in and out of the foster care system, now attends Bentley University and was the only freshman in his class to be offered a paid internship at one of the top accounting firms in Boston. John is currently homeless looking for work and hoping to receive financial aid so he can start taking courses at Bristol Community College in January 2012. They all continue to participate in Where Are YOU Headed? school-based programs and activities, and are always working on different hooks that may one day be the next musical sensation or the message that encourages other New Bedford youth to attend school, stay in school and graduate.

Figure 16: 2010-2011 District-wide Where Are YOU Headed? Activities

<table>
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<tr>
<th>Marketing &amp; Education</th>
<th>Special Events</th>
<th>Programs</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Exterior Where Are YOU Headed? billboards on twenty city buses, highlighting students attending the New Bedford Public Schools</td>
<td>April 2011 - 1st Annual Where Are YOU Headed? Elementary Basketball Tournament featuring over 150 students with at least 95% school attendance.</td>
<td>Skillz N Drillz Free basketball clinics in several of the city’s housing projects designed to encourage school attendance and graduation, while teaching the fundamentals of the game.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Event</td>
<td>Description</td>
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<td>Positive messages posted on the interior of all city buses stating</td>
<td>May 2011 - 9th Annual Youth Summit for 350 middle and high school students from New Bedford featuring workshops on overcoming challenging, making positive decisions, developing goals, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>the importance of daily school attendance</td>
<td>Dressed in their caps and gowns, graduates from the Whaling City Alternative High School conducting community service and promoted school attendance, persistence and graduation at New Bedford’s <em>Whaling City Festival</em>, talking to patrons of the festival about the importance of school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Where Are YOU Headed? posters featuring the individuals in the</td>
<td>June 2011 - 1st Annual <em>New Bedford Walks for Attendance</em> event - Over 10,000 students, parents, teachers and community members walked throughout the city to support improved attendance.</td>
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<td>2011 public service announcements and t-shirts were distributed to</td>
<td>Piloted a peer mentoring program at New Bedford High School with upperclassmen mentoring at-risk 9th graders with poor attendance.</td>
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<td>schools throughout the city.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Daily, automated phone call system to the homes of students who are</td>
<td>August 2011 - Debut of the 2011 music video created and performed by DaeDae and Kaotique to encourage school attendance at the elementary level “We’re Going to Have Fun Today”</td>
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<tr>
<td>absent and tardy was implemented at the middle and high school</td>
<td>The FACTS (Family and Community Together with Schools) Program held meetings at the Pacheco Elementary School since 2007 with representatives from DCFS and juvenile probation. This year the FACTS team at Pacheco included the attendance officer in an effort to address issues that may affect or be the result of poor school attendance.</td>
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<td>levels.</td>
<td>The Home Visiting Program-Staff providing outreach to students and families outside of school was piloted at the Carney Academy Elementary School.</td>
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<td>Attendance Task Force was established at NBHS.</td>
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Where is the Initiative ‘Headed’?

A great amount of creativity and planning has gone into the Where Are YOU Headed? initiative over the past two years. It could not have happened overnight, and it could not be accomplished by only one person. It requires a dedicated team of students (our experts), teachers, administrators, parents and community partners to assist in each and every activity; it requires true community-wide buy-in. Additionally, the use of well-known partners that students look up to and the relevance of the messages created are incredibly important. Without full buy-in into the concept from the superintendent of schools and school committee, the New Bedford Public Schools could not have accomplished so much in such a short time frame.

Two years after it all began, The Where Are YOU Headed? initiative has now in September 2011 been expanded into the New Bedford Public School’s mantra for all school attendance and graduation programming. The consistent messages and marketing of the campaign has evolved into a change in mindset. From something that was rarely discussed until a student was absent more than fifteen days, to becoming the foundation from which everything else lies, school attendance is now discussed in every classroom, in every school, every day.

All of the Where Are YOU Headed? events and programs were specifically designed using the extant literature and the findings of this study to do the following things: 1) educate students, parents and the entire community of the importance of school attendance; 2) form a sustainable district-wide foundation with a strong focus and high expectations for daily school attendance; 3) motivate students to improve their attendance; and 4) change existing, non-effective procedures for addressing poor school attendance (See Appendix for complete descriptions and examples).
**Figure 17: 2011-2012 Where Are YOU Headed? Planned Activities**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Marketing &amp; Education</th>
<th>Special Events</th>
<th>Programs</th>
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<tr>
<td>8x4 billboards will be displayed both inside and outside of all schools during the 2011-2012 school year.</td>
<td>Perfect Attendance Nights at all home football games beginning October 7th. Every student from kindergarten to grade 12 with perfect attendance for the month will receive one free student pass and two free parents passes to the game.</td>
<td>The Attendance Task Force will be expanded to include representatives from middle school, elementary school, community and school committee.</td>
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<td>The daily automated phone call system will be available at the elementary level in September 2011.</td>
<td>Every month schools compete for the highest attendance rate in the district. A traveling Attendance Champions banner will be presented to the elementary school, middle school and high school house with the highest overall percentage.</td>
<td>The peer mentoring program at New Bedford High School will continue for students (Green House) with poor attendance will be expanded to service twenty additional 9th graders in another house within the New Bedford High School.</td>
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<td>Positive Where Are YOU Headed? messages will be included on school lunch menus that are sent home every month.</td>
<td>School Attendance Celebration Week will be held October 11-14. Schools will design their own rallies, spirit days, and friendly competitions to engage students and parents.</td>
<td>The Home Visiting program will be expanded to include five more elementary schools and the alternative high school.</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student-created Where Are YOU Headed? and attendance bulletin boards will be displayed in every school.</td>
<td>The 1st Annual Educational Rally: Capturing the American Dream Through Education will take place on October 17th.</td>
<td>The FACTS program will train staff to conduct data driven collaborative intervention meetings in five additional elementary schools.</td>
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</table>
Postcards encouraging daily school attendance will be used by attendance officers and school counselors to send to students when they begin to exhibit poor school attendance patterns

The newly crowned Miss New Bedford’s platform is *Where Are YOU Headed?* and will be discussing the importance of school attendance and graduating in all of her public appearances and the Miss Massachusetts pageant

Building principals have determined to mandate for all teachers and staff to greet students with *I am so glad you are here today* and end their class with *I expect and want to see you all in school tomorrow* messages

The 2nd Annual Elementary Basketball Tournament will be held during February vacation

The Skillz N Drillz program will be included in the 21st Century after school programs at four elementary schools and one middle school throughout the school year

The 2nd Annual Walk for Attendance will take place in June after MCAS testing

The *Where are YOU Headed?* school attendance and graduation initiative is a key aspect to the New Bedford Public Schools’ Level 4 District Turnaround Plan

Presentation to the Associate Commissioner of MA DESE October 28, 2011

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**Recommendations for Further Action in the New Bedford Public Schools**


2. Improve systems to identify students who have multiple risk factors for non-attendance in elementary school and develop an individualized support plan that addresses the reasons they do not attend school.
3. Use attendance, DIBELS, benchmark testing and MCAS data to identify students who score in the warning/failing range as a result of chronic absenteeism and determine strategic interventions to address the issues.

4. Change the current compulsory school attendance policy and court-focused procedures from a punitive push out model to a school-based prevention model (Bowditch, 1992; Wilkins, 1993).

5. Eliminate out-of-school school suspension as a strategy to address chronic absenteeism (Blumenthal, 2008).

6. Expand alternative pathways to include technology mediated instruction, blended learning and credit recovery opportunities for at-risk students.

7. Combine community agencies' resources to develop systems of support to help reduce chronic absenteeism. For example, work with the Department of Child & Family Services (DCFS) to mandate school attendance for all students living in area foster care as a part of their care plan; and determine measures of school attendance accountability for the agency's foster parents (Sergiovanni, 1996).

8. Work with area pediatricians to support the district's attendance expectations.

9. Expand teacher/staff outreach to students' homes through the Home Visiting Program which was piloted at one elementary school in the district during the 2010-2011 school year (Adelman & Taylor, 2011).

10. Expand the FACTS (Family and Community Together with Schools) team approach for developing collaborative strategies with community agencies to address the reasons for chronic absenteeism.
11. Design on-going district-wide programs and events that focus on increasing student, parent and staff’s motivational readiness, engagement and understanding of the importance of school attendance and graduation (Willis, 1991).

12. Work with the New Bedford Housing Authority to develop a school attendance and graduation initiative for the residents of each housing project.

Summary

The findings of this study support the literature in explaining the reasons why students who are chronically absent do not attend school. The reasons included various combinations and configurations of community factors, family factors, student factors and school factors which despite the commonalities, are unique to each student. All of the participants (students, parents, teachers, attendance officers and administrators) agreed on the following:

There is a need for the district to examine individual student’s chronic absenteeism as a deficit that requires attention and intervention, rather than a personal choice or laziness. A study by Attendance Works (2011) suggests that promoting school attendance in the early grades is critical:

Chronic absence in kindergarten can translate into poor academic performance throughout elementary school, especially for children in poverty whose families lack the resources to help make up for time lost on task in the classroom (p.2).

The research also illustrates by sixth grade, chronic absenteeism also becomes the key early indicator that a student will drop out in high school (Baker, et.al., 2001; Balfanz, 2007; Fallis & Opotow, 2003). This mindset will allow all educational stakeholders to view the needs of at-risk
youth from a different perspective and enable the development of new and creative strategies and solutions to the problem.

Additionally, as a result of this study, the New Bedford Public Schools’ Where Are YOU Headed? school attendance and graduation initiative has the potential to becoming a research based program to assist urban districts improve school attendance at both at an individual student level and the district level. The program encompasses suggestions made by researchers over the past twenty years and participants within this study that thoughtfully and creatively address student engagement, school climate, motivational needs of at-risk students, outreach to families, collaborative community partnerships, wide spread education and marketing, etc. Because there is no one reason why students are chronically absent, there is no one solution.

**Recommendations for Further Research**

It is apparent from this study that more research is needed which focuses on influences within the school that affect school attendance rates. One example of such a study may be a longitudinal study focusing on the attitudes, beliefs, relationships and expectations of teachers and administrators and their impact on the educational success of at-risk students. The information gained from such a study could be used to design professional development opportunities, as well as curriculum and policy design. Furthermore, such data and information could and should be used to petition teaching institutions to create college courses that address the needs of urban, at-risk youth, increasing intrinsic motivation in disengaged students, behavioral classroom management that improves classroom climate, etc.

Additionally, the New Bedford Public Schools must continue to implement and expand the Where Are YOU Headed? school attendance and graduation initiative. A process evaluation
study must be designed and implemented to determine the effectiveness of the initiative’s activities and programs on individual student, school and district-wide attendance rates. In doing such an assessment teacher focus groups at the elementary, middle and high school levels should be conducted. Additional parent recruitment should be attempted via district staff persons or community agencies who have positive working relationships with them.
Appendix A: IRB Assurance of Principal Investigator

Northeastern University
Institutional Review Board
ASSURANCE OF PRINCIPAL INVESTIGATOR

Investigator(s): Heather D. Larkin

Title of Proposal: A Case Study: Improving School Attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools

To give assurance, please read and initial each statement, then sign below.

1. I have read and understand Northeastern University's Policies and Procedures Concerning the Protection of Human Subjects and the Federal IRB Assurance. I give my assurance that I, and all members of the research team, will adhere to the policies in this research.

2. I assure that no participants will be recruited or enrolled, and no data will be collected, without current, written approval from Northeastern University, and other sites as required.

3. I assure that the rights and welfare of all participants will be protected according to the procedures approved for this project by the NU IRB.

4. I assure that all risks or discomforts to subjects will be clearly explained, and that I will demonstrate how risks are outweighed by potential benefits to the subject or by the importance of the knowledge to be gained.

5. I assure that the informed consent of all participants will be obtained by methods that meet the requirements of Northeastern University's policy and assurance procedures.

6. I assure that no changes in research activity will be initiated without prior NU IRB review and approval, except where necessary to eliminate apparent immediate hazard to the subjects.

7. I assure that I will report any problems involving risks to human subjects or others promptly to the Office of Human Subject Research Protection.

8. I assure that there are no financial or other relationships (e.g., stock ownership, advisory board, speaker's bureau, honoraria) that might be viewed as creating a conflict of interest.

Signature: [Signature] Date: 11/30/10
Principal Investigator/Faculty Advisor

For student research, the faculty advisor is the principal investigator for the study and is primarily responsible for the ethical conduct of the research. Faculty must review and approve student research prior to submission for NU IRB review. Student investigators must sign this Assurance also.

Signature: [Signature] Date: 11/12/10
Student Investigator

DEPARTMENT CHAIR/PROGRAM DIRECTOR SIGNATURE (Required)

I am aware that this protocol is being submitted to the Northeastern University IRB. I do not make any assertions about human subject protections for this research project.

Signature: [Signature] Date:
Department Chair or Program Director

Please return completed form to: Human Subject Research Protection
960 Renaissance Park, Northeastern University
Boston, MA 02115
Tel: 617.373.7570, Fax: 617.373.4595

NU HSRP - Rev. 4-15-2010
Appendix B: National Institute of Health (NIH) Certificate of Completion

Certificate of Completion

The National Institutes of Health (NIH) Office of Extramural Research certifies that Heather Larkin successfully completed the NIH Web-based training course "Protecting Human Research Participants".

Date of completion: 11/11/2010

Certification Number: 566851

Appendix C: Approval Letter from the New Bedford Public Schools to conduct study

NEW BEDFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS
PAUL RODRIGUES ADMINISTRATION BUILDING
485 COUNTY STREET
NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS 02740
www.newbedfordschools.org

(508) 997-4511 Fax (508) 991-7483

MARY LOUISE FRANCIS, ED.D.
SUPERINTENDENT
November 15, 2010

Northeastern University
C/o Office of Human Subjects Research
960 Renaissance Park
Boston, MA 02115-5000

Dear Institutional Review Board Members,

After reviewing the proposed case study, “Improving School Attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools”, presented by Heather Larkin, a doctoral student at Northeastern University’s College of Professional Studies, I have granted permission for the study to be conducted within the New Bedford Public Schools.

The overarching goal of this research project is to determine best practices for improving school attendance and reduce the number of dropouts in the New Bedford Public Schools. The purpose of this study is to give at-risk students a voice to explain their perceptions and experiences about factors both internal to the structure of the New Bedford Public Schools, as well as external factors including a lack of motivation, poor decision making, poverty, a history of poor attendance, retention, poor behavior, etc. These stories may explain the district’s chronic absenteeism, yet also provide new perspectives of how to correct it.

I understand that Mrs. Larkin will be distributing survey and conducting focus groups and interviews with a group of students (grades 9-12), teachers, school administrators and parents. This proposed study’s data collection will begin following IRB approval. Mrs. Larkin plans to collect data outside of the regular school day but may utilize the schools as meeting places for participants. I expect this project will end no later than August 1, 2011.

I understand Mrs. Larkin will receive active parental/guardian consent for all participants, as well as releases for student pictures, audio and video recording of data collection sessions. Mrs. Larkin has agreed to provide to my office a copy of all Northeastern University IRB-approved, stamped consent documents before she recruits participants on campus. Any data collected by Mrs. Larkin will be kept confidential and will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Mrs. Larkin has also agreed to provide the district a copy of the aggregate results from her study.

If the IRB has any concerns about the permission being granted by this letter, please contact me at (508) 997-4511 ext. 3270 or MLFrancis1@newbedfordschools.org.

Sincerely,

Dr. Mary Louise Francis
Superintendent of Schools

The New Bedford Public Schools do not discriminate on the basis of age,

gender, race, color, national origin, religion, disability or sexual orientation.
Appendix D: Approval Letter from the New Bedford Public Schools to use district data

NEW BEDFORD PUBLIC SCHOOLS
PAUL RODRIGUES ADMINISTRATION BUILDING
455 COUNTY STREET
NEW BEDFORD, MASSACHUSETTS 02740
www.newbedfordschools.org
(508) 997-4511 Fax (508) 991-7483

MARY LOUISE FRANCIS, ED.D.
SUPERINTENDENT

HEATHER D. LARKIN
ASSISTANT SUPERINTENDENT
STUDENT SERVICES

LAWRENCE W. OLIVEIRA
CHIEF ADMINISTRATOR
FINANCE & OPERATIONS

CHERYL A. COSTA
HUMAN RESOURCES
MANAGER

Dear Ms. Regina,

This letter is to verify that Heather Larkin, Assistant Superintendent of Student Services for the New Bedford Public Schools, has permission to use the district’s student data. The data will be used to determine the participant sample for her study, Improving School Attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools.

I understand that Mrs. Larkin, as the Assistant Superintendent of Schools, has access to the district’s student and school-based attendance data, demographic student data, and other district data which is often used for program development, grant writing and various reporting mandates. In order to comply with federal and state law, and to protect the release of personally identifiable information contained in student records from disclosure to third parties, I have asked Mrs. Larkin to enter into the attached Agreement.

If the IRB has further questions about the permission being granted by this letter, please contact me at (508) 997-4511 Ext. 3270 or Mlfrancis1@newbedfordschools.org.

Sincerely,

[Signature]

Dr. Mary Louise Francis
Superintendent of Schools

The New Bedford Public Schools do not discriminate on the basis of age, gender, race, color, national origin, religion, disability or sexual orientation.
Agreement

This Agreement is made between Heather Larkin and the New Bedford Public Schools concerning the use of data maintained by the New Bedford Public Schools.

Whereas Heather Larkin, Assistant Superintendent for the New Bedford Public Schools, is a candidate for a doctoral degree at Northeastern University; and

Whereas Heather Larkin has requested permission to use student data maintained by the New Bedford Public Schools to determine the participant sample for her study: Improving School Attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools; and

Whereas Ms. Larkin, in her role as Assistant Superintendent, intends to share the results of her study with the New Bedford Public Schools for the purpose of improving instruction to New Bedford Public School students by improving school attendance at all levels and improving organizational practice and procedures in regard to working with at-risk youth;

The parties hereby enter into the following agreement to protect the release of personally identifiable information contained in student records from disclosure to third parties:

1. The New Bedford Public Schools will permit Ms. Larkin to access student records and/or data for the specific purpose of identifying students (and their parents) enrolled during the 2009-2010 school year who are either (1) currently enrolled, (2) graduated, or (3) dropped out from the New Bedford Public Schools; and who were: (1) absent for 40 plus days, (2) had two or more suspensions, (3) had a history of retention, and (4) qualified for a free/reduced lunch. The parties agree that the data will be used for the purpose of determining a participant sample for Ms. Larkin’s doctoral study. The scope and duration of the study will be from the date of IRB approval until completion of the study (October 2011).

2. Ms. Larkin agrees that personally identifiable information from education records will only be used to meet the purpose or purposes of the study as stated in this agreement.

3. Ms. Larkin agrees to conduct the study in a manner that does not permit personal identification of the parents and student to anyone other than Ms. Larkin.

4. Ms. Larkin agrees to destroy or return to the New Bedford Public Schools all personally identifiable information when the information is no longer needed for the study; and Ms. Larkin agrees that all such personally identifiable information will be destroyed following her successful dissertation defense.
Date: 2-8-11

Heather Larkin
Assistant Superintendent
New Bedford Public Schools and
Doctoral Candidate, Northeastern University

Date: 2-8-11

Mary Louise Francis
Superintendent of Schools
New Bedford Public Schools
Appendix E: IRB Approval – February 3, 2011

Northeastern

Notification of IRB Action

Date: February 3, 2011  IRB #: 10-12-01

Principal Investigator(s):  Angela Bermudez
                           Heather Larkin

Department:  College of Professional Studies/Education
Address:  420 BV
           Northeastern University

Title of Project:  A Case Study: Improving School Attendance in the New
                   Bedford Public Schools

Participating Sites:  New Bedford Public Schools—approval received (pending for use of
                     SIMS data and DESE District report cards)

Informed Consent:  One (1) signed consent form for Parents and Minors
                   One (1) unsigned consent for Teachers

Note: Approval for Student, Teacher and Attendance Officer Focus Groups and
      Administrator, Students and Parents/Caregivers Interviews is forthcoming

DHHS Review Category:  Expedited #6, #7

Monitoring Interval:  12 months

Approval Expiration Date: FEBRUARY 2, 2012

Investigator's Responsibilities:

1. Informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting
   participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new
   information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be
   reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior
   to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any
   other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina
Director, Research Integrity

Northeastern University FWA #: 4630
Appendix F: Approved Letter to Students

Date

Dear ,

Hello! My name is Heather Larkin. I am the Assistant Superintendent of the New Bedford Public Schools and a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am in the process of completing my dissertation: *A Case Study: Improving Attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools*. The goal of this research project is to determine how to improve school attendance in New Bedford. The purpose of this study is to give students a voice to explain their experiences and thoughts that may explain the district’s high absenteeism.

You are invited to take part in a research study that is being conducted within the New Bedford Public Schools. Based on your current or past school attendance history, it is believed that you have information regarding your experiences in the New Bedford Public Schools that may provide answers as to why students do not attend school. The information you provide may help to design interventions and supports to help other students in New Bedford.

Attached you will find a student survey, and informed consent form and a self-addressed stamped envelope. If you agree to participate in the study please do the following: 1) If you are under 18 years old, please have your parent or guardian sign the informed consent form; 2) You should sign the consent form as well; 3) Complete the enclosed survey, 4) return everything in the enclosed self-addressed stamped envelope. Please note the information you provide will be confidential and there are no consequences associated with your participation in this study.

I would like to thank you in advance for participating in this study. If you have any questions please contact me at (508) 328-5351 or at hlarkin@newbedfordschools.org.

Thank you,

Heather D. Larkin
Assistant Superintendent, New Bedford Public Schools
Doctoral Student, Northeastern University
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Investigator: Heather Larkin
Title of Project: A Case Study: Improving School Attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Student Survey Participant

You are invited to take part in a research study that is being conducted within the New Bedford Public Schools. The goal of this research project is to determine how to improve school attendance in New Bedford. The purpose of this study is to give current and former students a voice to explain their experiences and thoughts that may explain the district’s high absenteeism, and their ideas of how to correct it.

If you are interested in participating in this study, the researcher will be available to explain it to you and answer any questions you may have. 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. If you are under 18 years old please also have your parent or guardian sign this form. Enclosed is a second copy for you to keep.

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

As the Assistant Superintendent of Schools, I reviewed district data to determine a sample of students who met the criteria for this study. It is my belief that students with known risk factors for dropping out of school will provide this study the richest information and the best ideas for improving outcomes for other students in New Bedford with similar risk factors.

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have been identified as a student who missed 40+ days of school last year, have been suspended, possibly held back or retained at some point and are eligible for free or reduced lunch. You are also either 1) currently a student of New Bedford Public Schools, 2) have recently graduated or 3) dropped out. This researcher believes that it is your experiences and struggles that can help other children who do not want to go to school.

Why is this research study being done?

There are too many students in New Bedford who do not attend school and drop out. This researcher wants to know why and what can be done to change it. We are hopeful that everyone who provides information for this study will be assisting in developing better ways to keep kids in school so they can earn their high school diploma.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete the American School Climate Survey. The questions in the survey will ask you about your school experiences, why you choose to not attend school, what could the New Bedford Public Schools (for example teachers, principals and administrators) have done to help you be more successful.

APPROVED
NU IRB# 8-12-1
VALID THROUGH 2/12/13
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. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Will I be paid for my participation? Will it cost me anything to participate?

There is no payment or charge for participation.

Is there anything else I need to know?

As an employee of the New Bedford Public Schools, I am a mandated reporter of child abuse and neglect. If at any time during this study you indicate that you are experiencing abuse or feel you may harm yourself or someone else, I am required to report these concerns to the Department of Child & Family Services for further investigation.

There is a question on the survey that asks about bullying. Bullying is an issue that the New Bedford Public Schools takes very seriously. If you indicate that you have experienced bullying in school, I am required to give the information to New Bedford’s Director for Bullying Prevention, Denise Gaudette.

These actions must be taken to ensure the safety and well being of all students of the New Bedford Public Schools.

I agree to take part in this research.

_________________________  ___________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part  Date

Please check one of the following: _____ Current Student  _____ Dropout  _____ Graduate

Printed name of person above: ___________________________________________________________

_________________________  ___________________________
Signature of Parent or Guardian (if under 18 years old)  Date

**Please indicate if you interested in taking part in the next phase of this research project. The next phase includes focus groups of students to discuss the issue of improving school attendance. If you agree, you will be contacted in the next few weeks with more information.

_________________________  ___________________________
Address  Phone Number

APPROVED
Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

The researcher does not see any risk to you as a participant of this study. However, if you would like to speak with a counselor about any difficulties you are having, or to discuss options for returning to school, please contact me. I can provide you with contact information for supports in both the schools and the community.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There is no direct benefit to you as a participant of the focus group. However, by completing this survey you will be given the opportunity to share your thoughts and experiences that are important to you. The information in this study may help younger students in New Bedford stay in school and help teachers and principals better support students who may be thinking about 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 in any way.

Only researchers on this study will review the surveys, which will be used to develop notes to determine common. No names will be included in the transcript, participants names will be changed into a number code (survey member 1, survey member 2, etc.)

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 Northeastern University to see this information.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?

You may decide not to participate in the study at any time. If you decide not to participate, it will not affect your standing as a student (if still enrolled) in the New Bedford Public School System.

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 student.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

Please call Heather Larkin at (508) 328-5351, or my doctoral project advisor, Dr. Angela Bermudez at a.bermudez@neu.edu if you have any questions about this study.
Appendix H: American School Climate Survey – Student Version

AMERICAN SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY
STUDENT VERSION - 2006

This survey is designed to get your opinion concerning some aspects of school climate and your attitudes concerning your school, your community and yourself. Your input is very important. Your responses are strictly anonymous and you will not be asked to identify yourself at anytime during the survey. Please respond honestly and completely. At the end of the survey, please feel free to add any additional comments that you find appropriate and were unable to address in the survey. Thank you, in advance, for taking the time to respond.

DIRECTIONS:
• Indicate your response with a check mark (✓)
• Make your marks dark.
• Erase changes completely.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. GENDER
☐ Male  ☐ Female

2. ETHNIC BACKGROUND
☐ Black  ☐ White, Non-Hispanic  ☐ Hispanic  ☐ Native American  ☐ Asian
☐ Other ____________

3. HOME RESIDENCE (City & State)

4. Age ________________

5. HOME LANGUAGE
☐ English  ☐ Spanish  ☐ Portuguese  ☐ Cantonese  ☐ Mandarin  ☐ Thai
☐ Arabic  ☐ Hindi  ☐ Korean  ☐ Japanese  ☐ Other ________________

Following you will be asked a series of questions about your school. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement by filling in one of the five responses.

1. I feel safe at my school.
☐ Strongly Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Not Sure  ☐ Agree  ☐ Strongly Agree

2. An adult in my family (or someone that is taking care of me) visits my school often.
☐ Strongly Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Not Sure  ☐ Agree  ☐ Strongly Agree

3. I enjoy learning at my school.
☐ Strongly Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Not Sure  ☐ Agree  ☐ Strongly Agree

4. Students at my school fight a lot.
☐ Strongly Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Not Sure  ☐ Agree  ☐ Strongly Agree

5. I will continue my education at a community college or university.
☐ Strongly Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Not Sure  ☐ Agree  ☐ Strongly Agree

6. Students at my school trust the teachers.
☐ Strongly Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Not Sure  ☐ Agree  ☐ Strongly Agree

7. Teachers are able to stop someone from being a bully.
☐ Strongly Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Not Sure  ☐ Agree  ☐ Strongly Agree

8. I am hopeful about the future of the United States.
☐ Strongly Disagree  ☐ Disagree  ☐ Not Sure  ☐ Agree  ☐ Strongly Agree
9. At my school, teachers respect the students.
   - Strongly Disagree
   - Disagree
   - Not Sure
   - Agree
   - Strongly Agree

10. The noise in the school disrupts my learning.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

11. I wish that I were of a different race.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

12. My teachers make me feel good about myself.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

13. Some children carry guns or knives in my school.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

14. I believe that I will live beyond the age of 25 years.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

15. There are some children who I have seen bullied at least once per month.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

16. My teachers care whether I am successful or not.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

17. My parents are proud of me.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

18. At my school, teachers are fair to everyone.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

19. Students who are not of my race generally do better in school than I do.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

20. I am bullied during the school day at least once per month.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

21. If I work hard in school, I will be a successful adult.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

22. I look forward to coming to school most days.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

23. The children at my school live in my neighborhood.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

24. My parents want me to go to school.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

25. There are races of children whom are smarter than others.
    - Strongly Disagree
    - Disagree
    - Not Sure
    - Agree
    - Strongly Agree

COMMENTS:

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Version 2.5
Appendix I: Approved Letter to Staff

Date

Dear,

Hello! My name is Heather Larkin. I am the Assistant Superintendent of Student Services for the New Bedford Public Schools and a doctoral student at Northeastern University. I am in the process of completing my dissertation: *A Case Study: Improving Attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools*. The goal of this research project is to determine how to improve school attendance in New Bedford, especially at the high school level. The purpose of this qualitative study is to give students and staff a voice to explain their experiences and thoughts that may explain the district's high absenteeism, and their ideas of how to correct it.

You are invited to take part in a research study that is being conducted based on your current employment as a teacher at the high school level in the Bedford Public Schools. It is believed that your input may help to design interventions and supports to help all students in New Bedford.

Attached you will find an American School Climate teacher survey and an informed consent form. The informed consent form provides more specific information regarding your participation in this study. If you agree to participate, please send back survey via New Bedford Public Schools' interoffice mail to Heather Larkin- PRAB Room 126. Additionally, as a next step, I will be conducting focus groups. These will involve more detailed questions regarding school attendance, dropouts, policy & procedures, interventions, student profiles, ideas for improvement, etc. Each focus will consist of 6-8 participants (secondary level teachers). Please see the information provided at the end of the accompanying survey.

I would like to thank you in advance for participating in this study. If you have any questions please contact me at (508) 328-5351 or at hlarkin@newbedfordschools.org. You may also contact my doctoral project advisor, Dr. Angela Bermudez – a.bermudez@neu.edu.

Thank you,

Heather D. Larkin
Assistant Superintendent, New Bedford Public Schools
Doctoral Student, Northeastern University

[Approved stamp]
Appendix J: Approved Informed Consent – Teacher Survey Participant

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Investigator: Heather Larkin
Title of Project: A Case Study: Improving School Attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Teacher Survey Participant

You are being invited to take part in a research study that is being conducted within the New Bedford Public Schools. The goal of this research project is to determine how to improve school attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools. The purpose of this study is to give students and staff a voice to explain their experiences and thoughts that may explain the district’s high absenteeism, and their ideas of how to correct it.

If you are interested in participating in this study, the researcher will be available to explain it to you and answer any questions you may have.

You do not have to participate if you do not want to, the choice is completely yours. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep. The information you provide will be confidential and there are no consequences associated with your participation in this study.

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

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are currently a teacher at the high school level employed by the New Bedford Public Schools. This researcher believes that it is your experiences, struggles and successes with our highest risk students that can help inform this research and develop insight into students who do not want to go to school.

Why is this research study being done?

There are too many students in New Bedford who do not attend school and drop out. This researcher wants to know why and what can be done to change it. Each and everyone who provides information for this study could help to develop better ways to keep kids in school so they can earn their high school diploma.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete the survey in this packet and return it to this researcher. The questions in the survey ask you to answer questions about your school experiences, school climate and safety, and how the New Bedford Public Schools (for example teachers, principals or administrators) can help students want to attend school every day.
Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

The researcher does not see any risk to you as a participant. However, if at any time during this study, you feel you would benefit from additional support, the Employees Assistance Program (EAP) is available to you as a NBPS' employee. The number is (508) 990-0852.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

Participating in this study will give you an opportunity to share your thoughts and experiences as a teacher in the New Bedford Public Schools. It is hoped the information learned in this study will help students in New Bedford stay in school and also help teachers and principals better support students who may be thinking about 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 in any way.

No names will be included in the transcript, participants names will be changed into a number code (Survey member 1, Survey member 2, etc.)

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 Northeastern University to see this information.

Can I stop my participation in this study?

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. No information used from your participation or your decision NOT to participate will be used in any evaluative process for employees. 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 an employee of the New Bedford Public Schools.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

Please call Heather Larkin at (508) 328-5351, or my doctoral advisor, Dr. Angela Bermudez (a.bermudez@neu.edu), if you have any questions about this study.

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. You may call anonymously if you wish.
Please indicate if you are interested in taking part in the next phase of data collection: teacher focus groups. The focus will consist of 6-8 participants (secondary level teachers). More detailed questions will be asked regarding school attendance, dropouts, policy & procedures, interventions, student profiles, ideas for improvement, etc. If you agree, you will be contact in the next few weeks with additional information.

_____ Yes, I would like to participate in a focus group.

Name: ____________________________________________

School: __________________________________________

Phone Number or other contact information: ________________________________
Appendix K: American School Climate Survey – Teacher Version

AMERICAN SCHOOL CLIMATE SURVEY
TEACHER VERSION - 2006

This survey is designed to get your opinions concerning some aspects of school climate and your attitudes concerning the school in which you work, its community and yourself. Your input is very important. Your responses are strictly anonymous and you will not be asked to identify yourself at anytime during the survey. Please respond honestly and completely. At the end of the survey, please feel free to add any additional comments that you find appropriate and were unable to address in the survey. Thank you, in advance, for taking the time to respond.

DIRECTIONS:
• Indicate your response with a check mark. (✓)
• Make your marks dark.
• Erase changes completely.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

1. GENDER
   ○ Male  ○ Female

2. ETHNIC BACKGROUND
   ○ Black  ○ White, Non-Hispanic  ○ Hispanic  ○ Native American  ○ Asian
   ○ Other ____________

3. TOTAL YEARS TEACHING

4. HIGHEST EDUCATION LEVEL ATTAINED
   ○ Diploma  ○ Bachelor’s  ○ Master’s  ○ Doctorate

5. HOME LANGUAGE
   ○ English  ○ Spanish  ○ Portuguese  ○ Cantonese  ○ Mandarin  ○ Thai
   ○ Arabic  ○ Hindi  ○ Korean  ○ Japanese  ○ Other ____________

Following you will be asked a series of questions about your school. Please indicate how strongly you agree or disagree with each statement by filling in one of the five responses.

1. This school is a safe place in which to work.
   ○ Strongly Disagree  ○ Disagree  ○ Not Sure  ○ Agree  ○ Strongly Agree

2. I am currently pursuing in-service opportunities to improve myself as a teacher.
   ○ Strongly Disagree  ○ Disagree  ○ Not Sure  ○ Agree  ○ Strongly Agree

3. There are sufficient opportunities to learn new instructional methods.
   ○ Strongly Disagree  ○ Disagree  ○ Not Sure  ○ Agree  ○ Strongly Agree

4. Students at this school fight a lot.
   ○ Strongly Disagree  ○ Disagree  ○ Not Sure  ○ Agree  ○ Strongly Agree

5. Most students at this school would not be successful at a community college or university.
   ○ Strongly Disagree  ○ Disagree  ○ Not Sure  ○ Agree  ○ Strongly Agree

6. Students at this school trust the teachers.
   ○ Strongly Disagree  ○ Disagree  ○ Not Sure  ○ Agree  ○ Strongly Agree

7. I have been able to deter bullying behavior among students.
   ○ Strongly Disagree  ○ Disagree  ○ Not Sure  ○ Agree  ○ Strongly Agree

8. Administrators at this school trust my professional judgement.
   ○ Strongly Disagree  ○ Disagree  ○ Not Sure  ○ Agree  ○ Strongly Agree
9. I respect the students.
   - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

10. Students at this school are capable of high achievement on standardized exams.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

11. I would benefit from more professional development provided by the district.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

12. Students at this school are not motivated to learn.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

13. Some children carry guns or knives in this school.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

14. Most students in the school will live beyond the age of 25 years.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

15. I address bullying behavior in my classroom or at the school at least once per month.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

16. Teachers at this school care whether or not the students are successful.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

17. Parents are supportive of the school and its activities.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

18. Teachers are not fair to some students at this school.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

19. There are students who will be successful in this school because of their race.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

20. Teachers at this school work to foster a supportive climate for the students.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

21. We are preparing students to become productive citizens.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

22. I look forward to coming to work most days.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

23. Students in this school will have difficulty with core academic subjects regardless of strength of instruction.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

24. I have met most of my students' parents or adult caretaker.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

25. Racial barriers to educational and economic opportunity no longer exist in the United States.
    - Strongly Disagree  - Disagree  - Not Sure  - Agree  - Strongly Agree

COMMENTS:
Appendix L: IRB Modification – April 25, 2011

Northeastern

Notification of IRB Action
Modification

Date: April 25, 2011
IRB #: 10-12-01

Principal Investigator(s):
Angela Bermudez
Heather Larkin

Department: College of Professional Studies/Education
420 BV, Northeastern University

Title of Project: A Case Study: Improving School Attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools

Modification: addition of focus groups for students, parents/guardians, and teachers, attendance officers or administrators

Participating Sites: New Bedford Public Schools– approval received, which includes use of SIMS data and DESE District report cards

Informed Consent:
One (1) signed consent form for Parents and Minors
One (1) unsigned consent for Teachers
One (1) unsigned for Focus Groups

Note: Approval for Administrator, Students and Parents/Caregivers Interviews is forthcoming.

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7

Monitoring Interval: 12 months

Approval Expiration Date: FEBRUARY 2, 2012

Investigator's Responsibilities:

1. Informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina
Director, Research Integrity

Northeastern University FWA #: 4630
Appendix M: Approved Informed Consent – Focus Group Participant

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies  
Investigator: Heather Larkin  
Title of Project: A Case Study: Improving School Attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Focus Group Participant

You are invited to take part in a research study that is being conducted within the New Bedford Public Schools. The goal of this research project is to determine how to improve school attendance in New Bedford. The purpose of this study is to give students a voice to explain their experiences and thoughts that may explain the district’s high absenteeism, and their ideas of how to correct it. The information you provide will be confidential and there are no consequences associated with your participation in this study.

You indicated that you were interested in further participating in this study when you completed the survey. However, you do not have to participate if you do not want to, the choice is completely yours. 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?

You are being asked to participate in a focus group because you have been identified as: 1) a student enrolled at New at new Bedford High School or Whaling City High School and missed 40+ days of school last year, have been suspended and possibly held back or retained at some point in your education; 2) you are a parent/guardian of a New Bedford student who has exhibited poor attendance and as a result is at risk for dropping out of school; OR 3) you are a teacher, attendance officer, or administrator working at the secondary level for the New Bedford Public Schools. This researcher believes that your experiences and voice can help other children who do not want to go to school.

Why is this research study being done?

There are too many students in New Bedford who do not attend school and drop out. This researcher wants to know why and what can be done to change it. Each and everyone who provides information for this study could help to develop better ways to keep kids in school so they can earn their high school diploma.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this focus group, you will be asked to meet with this researcher and others who are in your particular group (student, parent, or staff). The questions in the focus group ask you to answer questions about school experiences, why you believe New Bedford youth choose not to attend school, and what could the New Bedford Public Schools (for example teachers, counselors or principals) can do to help students be more engaged in school and attend every day. Your participation and answers will be kept confidential and your name or other identifying information will not be shared.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

The researcher does not see any risk to you as a participant. However, if at any time during the focus group, you feel you would benefit from additional support, we have the following available to you:

- Staff: Employees Assistance Program (EAP) – (508)-990-0852

APPROVED

NU IRB# (3-15-14) (3-15-14)
VALID: THROUGH: 3-15-15
Some of the questions that will be explored may ask you to disclose personal information. The reason for this is because it will be through your experiences and voices that we will be able to explore why kids do not attend school. If at any time you do not feel comfortable answering a question, just say, “Pass Please”.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

Completing this focus group will give you the opportunity to share your thoughts and experiences that are important to you. The information learned in this study may help other students in New Bedford stay in school and may also help teachers and principals better support students who may be thinking about 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 in any way.
- No names will be included in the transcript, participants names will be changed into a number code (Focus Group Student 1, Focus Group Parent 1, Focus Group Teacher 1etc.)
- In rare instances, authorized people (such as my doctoral advisor at Northeastern University) 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 Northeastern University to see this information.

If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?

You may decide not to participate in the study at any time.

What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?

There is no anticipated harm that could be suffered if you participate in this study. If at any time the information asked makes you feel uncomfortable or brings up memories or feelings that are upsetting, this researcher can provide you with supportive options such as school or community counselors.

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 parent or family member.

Other Information:

- No information used from your participation or your decision NOT to participate will be used for:
  - Any evaluative process for employees or
  - Discipline for students
- The focus group process should take no more than 1 ½ hours to complete.
- The focus groups will be audio-taped and our conversation may be documented by a note taker. Everything you say will be treated confidentially; no specific opinions will be attributed to any particular person. Once the audiotapes have been transcribed, they will be destroyed.

APPROVED
NU IRB # 60-10-61
VALID 7/3/14
THROUGH 7/3/17
Next Steps in the Study

The next step in the data collection process of this study is to conduct in-depth one-to-one interviews with hopefully 2-3 students and their parents, a teacher, an Attendance Officer and an administrator. If you are interested in being part of an interview, please leave me your name, whether you are a student, parent or staff and contact information (phone number, email, etc.) before you leave today. I will then get in touch to schedule an interview at a time and place that is convenient for you.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

Please call Heather Larkin at (508) 328-5351 or my doctoral advisor, Dr. Angela Bermudez (abermudez@neu.edu), if you have any questions about this study.

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. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Is there anything else that I need to know?

There will be raffles for gift certificates to area stores and restaurants that will be drawn at the end of the focus group. Names will be randomly drawn from a box by May 6th. I will be contacting you on or about May 9th if your name was chosen.

Please keep a copy of this consent form for yourself.

Thank you,
Heather Larkin
Appendix N: Focus Group Protocol

A Case Study: Improving School Attendance in New Bedford
Focus Group Protocol

Facilitator: Heather Larkin
Participant: 
Date: 
Site: 

Welcome Participants and Introduce Myself and the Study

The session will begin by welcoming the interview participant, and thanking them for their participation at this more intense data collection level.

Say: “The focus group activities will explore reasons why students in New Bedford do not attend school and how the problems they grew up with may have negatively impacted their education.”

Purpose of the Discussion

SAY: “The New Bedford Public Schools is committed to improving school attendance, educational attainment and graduation rates. We want to learn from you about how we might do a better job of this. The purpose of this discussion is to capture your voice in understanding why students in New Bedford may not attend school and learn how you think the schools might do this, in an atmosphere of confidentiality, with no consequences to you or your school. All ideas are welcome and will be treated with respect.”

You are being asked to participate in this study because you have worked with a student or students who have a history of poor school attendance. This study is hoping you will share your understanding of the challenges you have witnessed in regards to the student attending school on a daily basis; what the schools could have done differently and what may have motivate the student to attend each day.

Distribute Informed Consent Form and Explain

Ask Permission to Record

SAY: “I want to talk with you about your experiences working with this student. This should take about an hour and a half or maybe a little more if you have a lot of ideas!

I would like to review a form with you; it will help us make sure that we are clear about our project and your participation (researcher will review the entire informed consent form). The form has names and numbers of people they can call if you have any questions or concerns. I want to be sure that you feel free to speak your mind.”

“With your permission, I’d like to tape our conversation and write down your thoughts and ideas on chart paper. Everything you say will be treated confidentially; no specific opinions will be attributed to any particular person, unless you first give us explicit permission. Is that OK? Any questions before we get started?”
Ask Participant to Introduce Themselves

Activity 1:
SAY: “Now, to help get a full picture of the student’s educational journey and pinpoint some potential factors that may have put him/her at greater risk for dropping out of school. Is that ok with you?”

Give the participants stickies. SAY: “Please write down words to describe the students you are thinking about.”

Begin the Discussion

Say: “Think of the at-risk students you have worked with that you will never forget. Now I am going to ask you to think as far back as you can go in their lives.

Activity 2:
Give the participants stickies and have them write as many reasons as they can remember explaining why the student had poor attendance in elementary school.

Repeat for middle school and high school. Post the stickies on the wall once completed. Continue the discussion by discussing each reason in detail.

Activity 3:
Give the staff more stickies if needed. Ask them to post everything that motivates students at the high school level. Have a discussion regarding what motivation is.

Once they are done, discuss each motivational factor and how it impacts the student’s decision to attend school. What else could be motivating to them?

Activity 4: Give more stickies
Depending on the student’s current situation: Graduate, current student or dropout, discuss the following: what the New Bedford Public Schools did or could have done to help them be more successful AND what their parents did or could have done to help them be more successful.

Close the Discussion
Thank you for participating. Please refer to the consent form and call if you have any more ideas or questions about this study. Where appropriate, I will assure them that their ideas will be reported to the school improvement team and that a short report will be posted on the school Website.

Northeastern

Notification of IRB Action
Modification

Date: June 9, 2011
IRB #: 10-12-01

Principal Investigator(s): Claire Jackson
Heather Larkin

Department: College of Professional Studies/Education
Address: 420 BV, Northeastern University

Title of Project: A Case Study: Improving School Attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools

Modification: addition of interviews for students, parents/guardians, and teachers, attendance officers and administrators

Participating Sites: New Bedford Public Schools—approval received, which includes use of SIMS data and DESE District report cards

Informed Consent: One (1) signed consent form for Parents and Minors
One (1) unsigned consent for Teachers
One (1) unsigned for Focus Groups

Approval Expiration Date: FEBRUARY 2, 2012

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

Investigator’s Responsibilities:

1. Informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.
7. 

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Director, Research Integrity

Northeastern University FWA #: 4630
Appendix P: Approved Informed Consent – Interview Participant

Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies  
Investigator: Heather Larkin  
Title of Project: A Case Study: Improving School Attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Interview Participant

You are invited to take part in a research study that is being conducted within the New Bedford Public Schools. The goal of this research project is to determine how to improve school attendance in New Bedford. The purpose of this study is to give students a voice to explain their experiences and thoughts that may explain the district’s high absenteeism, and their ideas of how to correct it. The information you provide will be confidential and there are no consequences associated with your participation in this study. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate in this study.

You indicated that you were interested in further participating in this study when you completed the survey and participated in the focus group. However, you do not have to participate in the interview if you do not want to, the choice is completely yours. 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?

You are being asked to participate in an in-depth 1:1 interview because you have been identified as: 1) a student enrolled at New at new Bedford High School or Whaling City High School and missed 40+ days of school last year, have been suspended and possibly held back or retained at some point in your education; 2) you are a parent/guardian of a New Bedford student who has exhibited poor attendance and as a result is at risk for dropping out of school; OR 3) you are a teacher, attendance officer, or administrator working at the secondary level for the New Bedford Public Schools. This researcher believes that your experiences and voice can help other children who do not want to go to school.

Why is this research study being done?

There are too many students in New Bedford who do not attend school and drop out. This researcher wants to know why and what can be done to change it. Each and everyone who provides information for this study could help to develop better ways to keep kids in school so they can earn their high school diploma.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this interview, you will be asked to meet with this researcher in a one-on-one session. The questions in the interview ask you to answer questions about school experiences, why you as a New Bedford youth choose not to attend school, why as a parent your child had poor school attendance and as a teacher or administrator what the New Bedford Public Schools need to do to help all students be more engaged in school and attend every day. Your participation and answers will be kept confidential and your name or other identifying information will not be shared.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

APPROVED
NU IRB# 11-09-1
VALID THROUGH 9/9/12
The researcher does not see any risk to you as a participant. However, if at any time during the focus group, you feel you would benefit from additional support, we have the following available to you:

- Staff: Employees Assistance Program (EAP) – (508)-990-0852
- Students: New Bedford High School Student Assistance Office – (508)-997-4511 Ext. 2304
- Parents: Child & Family Services – (508) 996-8572

Some of the questions that will be explored may ask you to disclose personal information. The reason for this is because it will be through your experiences and voices that we will be able to explore why kids do not attend school. If at any time you do not feel comfortable answering a question, just say, “Pass Please”.

**Will I benefit by being in this research?**

Completing this interview will give you the opportunity to share even more of your thoughts and experiences that are important to you. The information learned in this study may help other students in New Bedford stay in school and may also help teachers and principals better support students who may be thinking about 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 in any way.
- No names will be included in the transcript, participants names will be changed into a number code (Interview Student 1, Interview Parent 1, Interview Teacher 1, etc.)
- In rare instances, authorized people (such as my doctoral advisor at Northeastern University) 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 Northeastern University to see this information.

**If I do not want to take part in the study, what choices do I have?**

You may decide not to participate in the study at any time.

**What will happen if I suffer any harm from this research?**

There is no anticipated harm that could be suffered if you participate in this study. If at any time the information asked makes you feel uncomfortable or brings up memories or feelings that are upsetting, this researcher can provide you with supportive options such as school or community counselors.

**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 parent or family member.

**Other Information:**

- No information used from your participation or your decision NOT to participate will be used for:
  - Any evaluative process for employees or
  - Discipline for students
- The interview process should take no more than 1 ½ hours to complete.
The interview will be audio-taped. Everything you say will be treated confidentially; no specific opinions will be attributed to any particular person. Once the audiotapes have been transcribed, they will be destroyed.

Students will be given a pseudonym (fictitious name), as their detailed profiles will be the highlights of this case study.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

Please call Heather Larkin at (508) 328-5351 or my doctoral advisor, Dr. Angela Bermudez at Bermudez.angela1@gmail.com if you have any questions about this study.

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. You may call anonymously if you wish.

Is there anything else that I need to know?

There will be raffles for gift certificates to area stores and restaurants that will be drawn at the end of the interview sessions. Names will be randomly drawn from a box by July 1st. I will be contacting you on or about July 5th if your name was chosen.

Please keep a copy of this consent form for yourself.

Thank you,

Heather Larkin

I agree to take part in the research.

__________________________________________
Signature of person agreeing to take part Date

__________________________________________
Printed name of person above

__________________________________________
Signature of person who explained the study Date

APPROVED
NU IRB# 1 0-2; 3-1
VALID 5/9/11
THROUGH 5/2/12
Appendix Q: Interview Protocols

A Case Study: Improving School Attendance in New Bedford
Student Interview Protocol

Facilitator: Heather Larkin
Participant:  
Date:  
Site:  

Welcome Participants and Introduce Myself and the Study

The session will begin by welcoming the interview participant, and thanking them for their participation at this more intense data collection level.

Say: “The 1:1 in-depth interviews will dig deeper into the reasons why you did not attend school and the problems you grew up with that may have negatively impacted your education.”

Purpose of the Discussion

SAY: “The New Bedford Public Schools is committed to improving school attendance, educational attainment and graduation rates. We want to learn from you about how we might do a better job of this. The purpose of this discussion is to capture your voice in understanding why students in New Bedford may not attend school and learn how you think the schools might do this, in an atmosphere of confidentiality, with no consequences to you or your school. All ideas are welcome and will be treated with respect.”

You are being asked to participate in this study because you were identified as having a history of poor school attendance. This study is hoping you will share your understanding of the challenges you have had in regards to attending school on a daily basis; and what may motivate you to attend each day.

Distribute Informed Consent Form and Explain

Ask Permission to Record

SAY: I want to talk with you about your life experiences.

This should take about an hour and a half ů or maybe a little more if you have a lot of ideas!

I would like to review a form with you; it will help us make sure that we are clear about our project and your participation (researcher will review the entire informed consent form). The form has names and numbers of people they can call if you have any questions or concerns.

I want to be sure that you feel free to speak your mind.”
With your permission, I’d like to tape our conversation and write down your thoughts and ideas on chart paper. Everything you say will be treated confidentially; no specific opinions will be attributed to any particular person, unless you first give us explicit permission. Is that OK?

Any questions before we get started?

Ask Participant to Introduce Themselves

Activity 1:
SAY: Now, to help get a full picture of your educational journey and pinpoint some potential factors that may have put you at greater risk for dropping out of school, we are going to complete the New Bedford Public Schools At-Risk form which is used when students transition from elementary to middle and middle to high school. Is that ok with you?

Begin the Discussion

Say: “Now I am going to ask you to think back to the last 15-18 years of your life. We are going to do the same activity we did in the focus group. Only this time your answers should be about you and only you, not your peers as we did before. The information gathered will help us to tell your full story.

Activity 2:
Give the student stickies and have them write as many reasons as they can remember explaining why they had poor attendance in elementary school.

Repeat for middle school and high school. Post the stickies on the wall once completed.

Continue the discussion by discussing each reason in detail.

Activity 3:
Give the student more stickies if needed. Ask them to post everything that motivates them. Have a discussion regarding what motivation is.

Once they are done, discuss each motivational factor and how it impacts their decision to attend school. What else could be motivating to them?

Activity 4:
Depending on the student’s current situation: Graduate, current student or dropout, discuss the following: what the New Bedford Public Schools did or could have done to help them be more successful AND what their parents did or could have done to help them be more successful.

Close the Discussion
Thank you for participating. Please refer to the consent form and call if you have any more ideas or questions about this study. Where appropriate, I will assure them that their ideas will be reported to the school improvement team and included in future Where Are YOU Headed? programs.
NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION
MODIFICATION APPROVAL

Date: July 6, 2011
IRB #: 10-12-01

Principal Investigator(s): Claire W. Jackson
Heather Larkin

Department: Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies

Address: 42 Belvidere, Northeastern University

Title of Project: A Case Study: Improving School Attendance in the New Bedford Public Schools

MODIFICATION: Change in PI from Dr. Angela Bermudez to Dr. Claire W. Jackson.

Approval Status: Project is Ongoing and Open to Enrollment

Participating Sites: New Bedford Public Schools

Original Protocol Approved: February 3, 2011
Most Recent Approval Date: June 9, 2011 - modification

DHHS Review Category: Expedited #5, #6, #7

Informed Consents:
One (1) signed consent form for Parents and Minors
One (1) unsigned consent form for Teachers
One (1) unsigned consent for Focus Groups

As per CFR 45 46.117(c)(2) Signed consent is being waived as the research presents no more than minimal risk of harm to subjects and involves no procedures for which written consent is normally required.

This project is being approved under 45CFR46.404 which applies to children as research subjects and involves research not involving greater than minimal risk. Adequate provisions are made for soliciting the assent of the children and the permission of their parents or guardians, as set forth in 45CFR46.408.

Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: FEBRUARY 2, 2012

Investigator’s Responsibilities:
1. The informed consent form bearing the IRB approval stamp must be used when recruiting participants into the study.
2. The investigator must notify IRB immediately of unexpected adverse reactions, or new information that may alter our perception of the benefit-risk ratio.
3. Study procedures and files are subject to audit any time.
4. Any modifications of the protocol or the informed consent as the study progresses must be reviewed and approved by this committee prior to being instituted.
5. Continuing Review Approval for the proposal should be requested at least one month prior to the expiration date above.
6. This approval applies to the protection of human subjects only. It does not apply to any other university approvals that may be necessary.

C. Randall Colvin, Ph.D., Chair
Northeastern University Institutional Review Board

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection

Northeastern University FWA #4630
## Appendix S: Coding Samples

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Transcript Selection</th>
<th>Emic Coding</th>
<th>Etic Coding</th>
<th>Thematic Analysis</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Elvis (NBHS Dropout)</td>
<td>Negative messages from school/ teachers</td>
<td>Motivational Readiness is lacking but not gone</td>
<td>Student Factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Hopelessness?</td>
<td>Poor school climate teachers do not care</td>
<td>School Factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>School withdrawal = personal decision</td>
<td>Suspension Policy = fall behind</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of support from school</td>
<td>Are alternatives available?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Did anyone try to stop him? Reach out to family?</td>
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<tr>
<td>John (WCAS Graduate)</td>
<td>Gang involvement/ violence/ drug dealing</td>
<td>Motivation</td>
<td>Community Factors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Lack of maturity</td>
<td>Extrinsic = streets, making money, fighting</td>
<td>Student Factors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Freedom</td>
<td>Intrinsic = Reputation for being tough</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>No connection to the importance of school</td>
<td>Need- Money</td>
<td>School Factors</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Boredom at school</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Disengagement</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Instant gratification = selling drugs</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Negative messages from peers</td>
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<tr>
<td>Students have very little motivation to succeed. They show minimal, if any, respect to others. Parents/guardians are rarely evident or accessible. Most students forge the emergency contact and other forms, giving phony phone numbers that take teachers/administrators weeks to be able to contact a &quot;responsible adult.&quot;</td>
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<tr>
<td>NBHS Teacher</td>
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<tr>
<td>Respect</td>
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<td>Parents are the problem</td>
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<tr>
<td>Student/parents are a burden to school staff; it causes extra work</td>
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<td>Lack of communication between school and home</td>
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<td>Lack of connection between school and success</td>
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<td>Lack of trust</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of motivation</td>
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<tr>
<td>No ownership by school staff</td>
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<td>What is the message from the school?</td>
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<td>Family Factors</td>
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<td>Student Factors</td>
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<td>School Factors</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Tyler—WCAS Junior</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I've been thinking about my future. All I have is a few years to go, why would I wait until later, the sooner I do it, the sooner I can go to college and start making money. I don't want to be a bum and wake up ten years from now and be bored in the streets? No way! I have to think about things in the long run! My brother tells me how fun college is; you get to meet new people, learn</td>
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<tr>
<td>Understanding of the connection between school and later success</td>
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<tr>
<td>Goals for future - college</td>
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<tr>
<td>Expectations for a better life</td>
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<tr>
<td>Has a positive adult in life; expectation of college</td>
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<tr>
<td>Positive role model and positive message</td>
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<tr>
<td>Motivation—both intrinsic and extrinsic</td>
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<tr>
<td>Need—Food, Money</td>
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<tr>
<td>Family Factors</td>
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<td>Student Factors</td>
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<table>
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<th>Family Factors</th>
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<tr>
<td>Student Factors</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Factors</td>
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</table>
new things and they give you a card and you can swipe it and get all kinds of food—you wouldn’t want that?

Ms. Santiago (Parent)
I know it is hard because the kids start to think they are all grown, but the teachers, they don’t know. If they don’t know what is going on in the house, or on the streets and you respond rough to him—these kids are not going to respond good either.

Because the teachers never really know what is going on, they get mad because they just sit there and not do their work or sleep. Either they don’t know how to do the work or they are bothered by something.

Students’ lives are chaotic
Respect
Defensiveness
Street life affects school
Home life affects school
Anger affects behavior, relationships with staff, and ability to do work
Negative messages

School Climate
Relationships with Staff
Lack of staff understanding
Need for more training?
Student attributions
Motivation
Student Needs may be unknown

Community Factors
Family Factors
Student Factors
School Factors

Teacher
I think that these parents are definitely the issue. The majority of them do not work, but they are very resourceful when they want to get welfare or get their kids on SSI. What they are teaching their kids is that you don’t need a job but you

Parents are the problem
Welfare/disability system
Poor role modeling
Expectations from home
Lack of goals for future

School’s responsibility to families
Communication between school and home
Motivation – dependence on system
What is the message

Community Factors
Family Factors
School Factors
do need a disability if you want to get the SSI. I don’t think the district should have to be responsible for fixing the parents too.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>from the school?</th>
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Appendix T: Where Are YOU Headed? marketing examples

School Attendance is the Single Most Important Factor in School Success!

If you are not headed to school... you may be headed to becoming a drop out!

- Approximately 1.2 million students drop out each year – about 7,000 every school day, or 1 every 26 seconds.
- The problem is most serious in urban districts like New Bedford, where low attendance rates and the high school graduation rates are 15% lower than those in neighboring suburbs.
- We must improve outcomes for students in New Bedford who are placed at risk for dropping out of school.

“The decisions you make today will shape your world tomorrow.”

Brought to you by the New Bedford Public Schools 2010
Where are YOU? Headed The Decision is YOURS!

ATTEND SCHOOL!

STAY IN SCHOOL!

GRADUATE!

"The decisions you make today will shape your world tomorrow."

Brought to you by the New Bedford Public Schools 2011
IMPROVING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

New Bedford Public Schools

and be successful in life.

Students who attend school every day are more likely to graduate, attend college.

The decision is yours!

Where are you headed?
New Bedford Public Schools

improve in life, are more likely to graduate, and attend college.

Students who attend school every day.

The decision is yours!

Where are you headed?
IMPROVING SCHOOL ATTENDANCE

New Bedford Public Schools Attendance & Graduation Initiative

Where: New Bedford
When: Friday June 3rd
Time: 10am - 12pm
What: Students of New Bedford

Attend School!
Stay In School!
Graduate!

Where: WereAreYouHeadsed.net
Why: Parents and community partners are encouraged to walk.
Walking in unity to promote improved school attendance

100%
Attendance Champions

Where Are You Headed? 100% Attendance Champions Banner to hang in their school.

All schools who reach 100% attendance will receive a
“Where are YOU Headed?” gets kids going in the right direction

By SARAH GONET
CONTRIBUTING WRITER
April 13, 2010 12:00 AM

NEW BEDFORD — A pediatrician headed to an exam room to diagnose a young patient. An inmate headed back to his cell at the Bristol County House of Correction. A promising young college athlete.

You might be asking yourself what these very different people have in common. The answer is simple: they all made important decisions that directly impacted where they are today.

"I hung out with friends on the streets of New Bedford. If I actually listened to some of the people who actually cared enough to tell me what to do out of love, I'd have stayed in school," said the inmate, identified only as "Patrick" in a video for the New Bedford Public School's "Where are YOU Headed?" campaign.

"Where are YOU Headed?" has the goal of educating students, parents and the community about the importance of life decisions, while at the same time planting the seed of the fundamental importance of school attendance.

Patrick said he took some bad roads: "Doing drugs. Selling Drugs. Nonsense really. And now I'm locked up here."

The concept was developed by the students at the Whaling City Alternative School, with support from New Bedford High School's Television Production Program and a cadre of other local programs and nonprofit organizations. It has since evolved and expanded to become the foundation and framework for a variety of dropout prevention programs across the entire school district.

"Where are YOU Headed?" presents the accomplishments, and missteps, of former New Bedford Public School students. The clear, shocking value of the brief commercial spots is meant to catch the attention of students considering skipping, and eventually, dropping out of school.

"At the root of it all is school attendance," said Heather Larkin, assistant superintendent of special services for the New Bedford public schools. "There's nothing more fundamental than simply showing up for class and being invested in your education."

"If I could give one piece of advice, it would be (to) love and respect yourself and stay in school," Patrick said in his video.
"Where are YOU Headed?" gets kids going in the right direction.

"Because of my decisions, I'm headed back to my cell. Where are you headed?"

The deeply moving series of commercials also features gut-wrenching personal commentary from 24-year-old Tiffany, a homeless mother currently living in a local family shelter with her young child.

"I was really good in school at first and then all my friends influenced me to skip school," she said, holding her infant in her lap.

"Not having a high school diploma ... I'm living in a family shelter with 16 other families. I'm looking for a home for my family. Where are you headed?"

Larkin said former School Superintendent Dr. Portia Bonner "came to us with a directive to increase district-wide attendance.

"At first, we weren't sure how that was going to take shape with the (alternative school) students. It took on a life of its own once they were engaged."

Four students from Whaling City Alternative — Juan Sanchez, Adam Leite, Devon Cuba and Isaiah Ferguson — took the idea and ran with it, coordinating every aspect of video production.

"Two years ago, I made the decision to drop out of high school and do nothing," said Adam, now back in the classroom as a junior at Whaling City Alternative. The school serves approximately 60 students who have experienced difficulty assimilating into the traditional high school environment.

"It was the worst thing I ever did," Adam said. "I thought about going back to school at night when I heard about Whaling City Alternative. This place has turned my life around."

Adam now attends classes religiously and is a mentor with the SMILES program. In addition, he plans to attend college after graduating. All are testimony to the success of the program and the impact of projects like "Where are YOU Headed?"

"I don't remember being brought to the table like these students have been, back when I was in school," said Lynne Markey, F.A.C.T.S. (Family And Community Together with Schools) program facilitator.

"The key is that you have to have the students personally invested in the project."

Just as some of the commercial spots focus on former students who made poor decisions, others highlight success stories like 1993 New Bedford High School graduate

"Where are YOU Headed?" gets kids going in the right direction | SouthCo... Page 3 of 3

Athena Xifaris, who is currently a practicing pediatrician and 19-year old Jordan Todman, who currently plays football for the University of Connecticut.

"I've always had a supportive family that's been there when I need them and they're a big part of why I'm where I am today," said Maggie Poyant, a senior at New Bedford High School. A three-sport athlete and class salutatorian, Maggie filmed a recent "Where are YOU Headed spot?" with her mother, Ellen. "I worked hard. Anybody can do it if they put the time in."

"These commercials aren't just for the students," said Larkin, stressing everyone needs to get involved in helping kids make good choices. "It has to be parents, teachers, the entire community. This isn't just a problem of the high school."

Devon Cuba said he "was expelled from school in the tenth grade. Sitting home, it made me realize how much I actually wanted to be here ... No one should drop out."

The student production team is currently working on tactics to take "Where are YOU headed?" to the middle and elementary school levels. Some of their ideas include developing cartoon characters like Captain Attendance and Dr. Tardy to capture the interest of the younger students.

"We need different strategies for the younger kids," said Juan Sanchez, a senior who is contemplating entering the military after graduation.

"This has had a big impact on me. It's been an eye opener for me. You need an education; there's no question about it."

To view the "Where are YOU Headed?" video spots, visit www.newbedfordschools.org and click on "Parents & Community" and then "Where are YOU Headed?"

Carney students take to streets to promote school attendance

By CHRISTINA HICKMAN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER
June 04, 2011 12:00 AM

Streets were blocked off; spectators cheered from the sidewalks, and cars beeped in support for close to 600 Carney Academy students who, along with their teachers and parents, took to the streets Friday in support of the city's Walk For Attendance.

Brandishing signs that read "Attend School/Stay in School/Graduate," Carney students cheered all the way from the school to City Hall, where Matthew Morrissey, New Bedford Economic Development Council executive director, greeted them. He was representing Mayor Scott W. Lang, who was out of town.

Carney, along with numerous other city schools, participated in the walk and other outdoor activities to promote the importance of regular school attendance, an issue plaguing the district.

"It's a myth that the schools can do it on their own," said Ross Grace Jr., assistant principal at Carney. "It has to be all of us together: schools, parents and the community."

The walk was part of the citywide "Where are YOU headed?" school attendance and graduation initiative, designed by the students and staff of the Whaling City Alternative School.

"Parents aren't realizing how important it is to get their children to school every day," said Peter Larkin, an attendance officer for the New Bedford Public Schools.

Although the city's elementary schools have a 95 to 98 percent attendance rate, Larkin noted that attendance drops dramatically after that, with middle schools' attendance percentage ranging from 85 to the low 90s and the high school at 80 percent, where it has been for the past 10 years.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 requires students to maintain a 95 percent attendance rate. At the high school level, this figures to 5 absences per semester, a total of 20 per year. Many seniors have as many as 30, 40 or 50 absences, Larkin said.

When they returned to Carney, students were treated to a special performance by David Mendez Jr. and Quinn Perry, 2010 graduates of New Bedford High who wrote a song called "Where are YOU headed?" for the initiative. The duo performed the song and debuted a new song geared toward younger children, those who have the most time to make a change.

Mendez, who now attends Bentley College, said attendance was one of his strengths in school.

"I always thought, 'If you go to school every day and do the work, how can you get F's?""

Perry, a student at Worcester Polytechnic Institute, agreed.

"You need to use every opportunity you have to do your best, including going to school each day," he said.

Dr. John Fletcher, a New Bedford School Committee member, and Heather Larkin, the city's assistant superintendent of special education and student services, were among those on hand for the festivities at Carney.

"This is what we preach every day: good decisions, coming to school, planning for the future," Grace said.
No summer hiatus for "Where are YOU Headed?"

September 02, 2011 3:03 PM

NEW BEDFORD – One thing the New Bedford Public Schools' “Where Are YOU Headed?” program didn’t do this summer was take a vacation.

Instead, the initiative sponsored traveling basketball clinics – “Skillz N Drillz” – from July 5th - Aug. 5th, led by New Bedford High School's all-time leading scorer, Marcus Wills.

Also participating were current NBHS athletes, Whaling City students and a local alum, now a senior at Clark University. They not only taught the city's youth the fundamentals of the game, but also served as positive role models and mentors to encourage school attendance, good grades and graduation, program officials said.

More than 250 kids took part in the summer programs at Carney Academy, Rodman Elementary, and Roosevelt Middle, as well as at Magnett Park and Clasky Common Park, where they heard positive messages to get them ready for the new school year.

Program officials said the outreach throughout the summer was important “to keep the kids engaged but especially to help them build the connection between going to school every day and doing well later in life.

“Starting in elementary school and continuing throughout high school our children need to be saturated with positive messages about the importance of their education: from their parents, teachers and peers,” a spokesman said.

The grand finale for the summer session was held Aug. 5 at Magnett where parents and community members watched the children show off their “skillz” while demonstrating the “drillz” and participating in contests and winning prizes. There was also a celebrity hot shot contest.

With the new academic year kicking into gear this week in New Bedford, the folks at Where are YOU Headed? are promising lots more good things are on the horizon in the weeks and months ahead. Stay tuned.
Showing Up: NBPS program stresses good attendance

By CHRISTINA HICKMAN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER
October 11, 2011 12:00 AM

NEW BEDFORD — As the Where are YOU headed? attendance initiative heads into its third year, how is Heather Larkin, its creator, still rapid-firing new ideas to help the program continue to grow?

"I don't know. They just come to me," responded Larkin. "Anywhere and everywhere I can get the message out and get people to start to buy into it."

A skilled multi-tasker, she is the assistant superintendent of special education and student services, the mastermind behind the program, and is currently writing her doctoral dissertation at Northeastern University about improving attendance.

During a meeting in fall 2009, Whaling City Alternative High School students expressed that sometimes, their teachers don't seem to care about them. When Larkin asked how teachers could be more caring, students replied, "When we're walking out the door, someone could say, 'Hey, where are you headed right now?"

The phrase stuck with Larkin, and she began designing and implementing the WAYH? initiative, gaining the support of teachers, staff, and New Bedford School Superintendent Dr. Mary Louise Francis.

"I was absolutely thrilled she wanted to do this," said Francis. "It was just right in keeping with what we're trying to do as a district."

The program started at a time when the city's attendance rates had been on a downward trend. During the 2009-2010 school year, New Bedford High School's average days absent was 23.3. The state average? 9.3.

"There's so many different reasons why kids don't go to school. Instead of saying they're unmotivated or they don't care about school or it's the parents, we need look at each individual kid because they each have stories," Larkin said.

This is why WAYH? is designed to start addressing the kids' attendance issues before it becomes a problem that gets them behind.

"Attendance," we don't talk about it. It's expected. We bring it up and address when kids have missed a certain number of days," said Larkin. "But why not be proactive and talk about it every day and set that expectation?"

And being proactive is exactly what Larkin and the WAYH? initiative are addressing, especially with the creation of numerous new attendance incentives and events.

Rallying for education: "by the students, for the students"

By CHRISTINA HICKMAN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER
October 11, 2011 12:00 AM

NEW BEDFORD — "Capturing the American Dream Through Education," a first-of-its-kind city-wide education rally, will be held at noon on Monday, Oct. 17 outside the Paul Rodrigues Administration Building, 455 County St.

Co-sponsored by "Where are YOU headed?" the event is spearheaded by the New Bedford High School Student Advisory Council. Chairman of the SAC, senior Justin Braga, calls it an event "created by the students, for the students."

Elementary, middle and high school students are expected to attend the rally, arriving at the administration building at about 11:30 a.m. There will be speakers representing different groups who affect the education system, Braga explained, such as teachers, students, parents, community members, government officials, and school administrators.

"We're trying to incorporate all the different stockholders in education," said Braga. "We want all to feel valued in the reform effort in the city."

The high school will be sending its band, chorus, cheerleaders, football players, and ROTC to the event to perform. Braga says he hopes there will be student performers from other grade levels as well.

He said he wants first to "show students, government leaders and community members who have succeeded through education" and, secondly, to "get government leaders to listen to what these people have to say."

"The rally is an event to spread that message and get our students excited and encourage positive support" from the community, he said.

On another WAYH (Where are YOU headed) front, Quinn Perry and David Mendez Jr. are at it again.

The duo, both 2010 graduates of New Bedford High School, last month debuted another "Where are YOU headed?"-themed music video. The song, "Can't Wait To Have Fun Today," is a follow-up to the original WAYH? theme song, except it is geared toward elementary-aged students.

New Bedford elementary schools Carney, Winslow, Parker, Pulaski and Rodman are all featured in the video, filmed in June by NBHS TV production teacher Bob Perotti.

A pep rally for New Bedford schools

By CHRISTINA HICKMAN
CONTRIBUTING WRITER
October 18, 2011 12:00 AM

NEW BEDFORD — City residents of all ages and backgrounds rallied Monday afternoon on the steps of the Paul Rodrigues Administration Building for a common interest: to support the future direction of the New Bedford Public Schools.

"Today we gather united as a city to stand behind a cause," said Justin Braga, president of New Bedford High School's Student Advisory Council.

More than 600 students from a number of city schools gathered for the "Capturing the American Dream Through Education" rally, along with parents, city officials, teachers and members of the community.

Children tooted signs bearing the slogan of the city’s "Where are YOU Headed?" initiative and adults sported red and white, the high school's colors.

Braga and the Student Advisory Council spearheaded the rally, originally bringing the idea to the high school's headmaster, Andrew Kulak. He reached out to Assistant Superintendent Heather Larkin and Where are YOU Headed? to co-sponsor the event, which Braga hopes will "encourage the entire community to embrace the values of education."

"I'm so proud of them. The students took the initiative to get the word out and get all the stockholders to come together," said high school Dean of Students and Student Advisory Council adviser Carrie Cetenich.

"We all think it's essential to have a good educational background," said Student Advisory Council member and high school football player Alex Pimentel.

The range of speakers at the rally showcased the variety of the stockholders in a child's education, ranging from teachers and parents to city officials, administrators and community members, a factor Braga stressed as highly important to the success of the New Bedford Public Schools.

"'Capturing the American Dream Through Education' is more than just a title; it's words to live by," said Dr. Mary Louise Francis, city schools superintendent, calling it a "great day for New Bedford Public Schools and a great day for New Bedford."

Emanuel Dias, whose daughter is a New Bedford High senior, spoke of his personal educational journey, having come to the United States from Cape Verde at the age of 20, taking English night classes while working a full-time job, getting his high school diploma here and recently graduating from college.

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