EVALUATING AN ALTERNATIVE PATHWAY:

A PROGRAM EVALUATION

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by

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ABSTRACT OF DOCTORAL THESIS
This qualitative study evaluated the current dropout prevention strategy designed and implemented by the Clear Water Public School District, a program that is currently attempting to meet the specific needs of its students. An in-depth evaluation study was conducted at Urban High School—an alternative school created in 2008, which services students who are not being successful in the mainstream high school or who have been excluded from their neighborhood schools within the district for unsafe behaviors. A formative assessment identified, documented, and consolidated the program’s strengths and perceived areas of weakness that require improvement. Furthermore, this study detailed the strategies and interventions that are currently being utilized and how said strategies and interventions directly affect students’ lives. In addition, practices and interventions utilized at Urban High were reconciled against the current literature on effective practices used in alternative settings that serve comparable at-risk student populations. Critical Theory and Program Theory formed the theoretical framework that guided the literature review. The corresponding inquiry included the following empirical research questions: 1.) How do students experience Urban High School? 2.) How has the new alternative program implemented in the Clear Water Public School District impacted students’ grades, attendance, behavior, and overall school performance? 3.) How does the design and
implementation of Urban High School compare to the criteria of effective practices established through a review of the literature? 4.) How do the practices used at Urban High School address educational equality and equity?

*Keywords*: alternative schools, alternative student perspectives, program evaluation, educational equity, effective practices in alternative schools
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Chapter One

The Problem of Practice

Over a million students, who enter ninth grade in the United States, fail to graduate with their peers four years later. In fact, approximately seven thousand students drop out every school day (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2009). In the 2008-09 school year, 8,585 Massachusetts students—grades nine through 12—dropped out of school. Currently, the city of Clear Water has a dropout rate of 8.3% (MA DESE, 2010).

Concern with the issue of dropout has led to decades of research, followed by national and local attempts to reform our country’s educational system. It has been nearly three decades since A Nation at Risk (1983), a report by the National Commission on Excellence in Education on the conditions of American Education, was released. The controversial report given to the Secretary of Education of the United States Department of Education highlighted recommendations identified to improve education in the United States. The recommendations in the report were based on the beliefs that everyone deserves and can benefit from “life-long” learning experiences, which lead to successful careers. These experiences can only begin with proper nurturing, and a solid school foundation (National Commission on Excellence in Education, 1983).

In order to achieve the goals set by the National Commission on Excellence in Education, urban school districts, such as Clear Water, need to address the issue of dropout. Understanding the magnitude of the dropout problem and the forces that impact dropout rates is critically important to developing dropout prevention strategies. As of the 2000 census, Clear Water—one of the three cities located in south coast Massachusetts—reported an estimated 91,365 residents in 2008, making it the seventh-largest city in the Commonwealth. According to the Bureau of
Labor Statistics, in March of 2010, Clear Water reported an unemployment rate of 13.8% (United States Department of Labor, 2010). The city also reported a rate of more than 50% of its population failing to complete high school, with only 10.7% of adult residents earning college degrees (Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2002).

Addressing the dropout problem creates significant challenges for communities and school districts. One strategy used by school districts and educators throughout the United States is alternative education. The number of alternative schools serving at-risk students has grown significantly over the past decade. Many school districts are creating alternative schools to be part of their school districts’ dropout prevention strategy (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2009). According to surveys and reports of existing alternative schools, there are over 11,000 alternative schools and programs that reach out to students who are at risk of dropping out (Kleiner, et al., 2002). These alternative settings provide a variety of strategies to address dropout rates, such as small class size, one-on-one interaction between teachers and students, supportive environments, student-centered curriculum, flexibility in structure, as approaches to improve student success (Lange & Sletten, 2002).

Implemented in August of 2008, the Urban High School is an alternative school designed to service students in Clear Water who have been excluded from neighboring schools under Massachusetts General Laws (MGL) chapter 70, 37h or 37h1/2. Many of these students would be Clear Water Public School’s future dropouts. The school also serviced students who had dropped out of school but reenlisted when Urban High was established. These students had agreed to attend because of its non-traditional structure and creative vision.

Since its creation, Urban High has utilized various strategies and interventions that have appeared to have some positive impact on students’ lives, as well as their academic progress.
Many Urban High students have shown improvements in attendance, grades, and behaviors since they began attending. The small alternative school has attempted to address many risk factors and student needs such as student engagement, retention and missing credits, truancy, and unmet emotional needs. Urban High’s vision and belief system addresses more than just the academic needs of its students; it also utilizing philosophies that are not always used in traditional school settings, including focusing on the “whole child.”

**Purpose of the Study**

This research project evaluated Urban High School’s current dropout strategy through a systemic, formative assessment, which identified, documented and consolidated the program’s strengths, as well as perceived areas of weakness. The study relied on data collected from students, parents, and teachers and detailed the strategies and interventions that are currently being utilized. It also analyzed how said strategies and interventions directly affect students’ lives. In addition, practices and interventions utilized at Urban High were reconciled against the current literature on effective practices used in alternative settings that serve comparable at-risk student populations.

Overall, the project provided information that will be valuable to the district, as Clear Water prepares to move forward toward district restructuring. It identified essential elements and strategies that contributed to the improvement of the school climate, engaging at-risk students and increasing their academic success. Applying the successful elements, strategies, and interventions to mainstream schools could impact more students and prevent more dropouts. Currently, most students who benefit from the strategies and interventions used in alternative settings have been excluded from mainstream schools due to a significant behavioral incident.
Proactively utilizing successful strategies and interventions in mainstream schools may increase academic success for many other students.

**Discussion of Practical and Intellectual Goals**

This research project highlighted several practical goals. Through serving as a secondary school clinical administrator for 10 years and working with students with multiple risk factors for 18 years, I have developed a keen interest in positive youth development. As a result, I have used my experience with at-risk students, my clinical background, and the research on dropout to help improve the lives of the population that I currently serve. At the beginning of this program evaluation, I was the principal of Urban High. I was significantly involved in the creation and implementation of the program, as well as overseeing the interventions and the daily operations of the school. During my tenure, I developed an interest in evaluating the program to ensure that students were being served appropriately. My hope is that this research will also serve to ensure that these students are being better prepared for their futures.

As Maxwell (2005) states, “Intellectual goals … are focused on understanding something—gaining insight into what is going on and why this is happening, or answering some question that previous research has not adequately addressed” (p. 21). Because it is important to continue to explore how alternative education can positively impact the problem of drop out in urban communities, I sought to formally explore what elements of the Urban High alternative program made the biggest difference for at-risk students and what elements were the least effective. This information could also inform future decisions about the program and serve as important data to help serve at-risk students in other schools in the district.

Research has also shown that factors such as discipline, attendance, poverty, and lack of academic success can predict indicators of potential dropouts. Research further suggests that in
students in urban districts face more than one of these risk factors (NCES, 2002). Schools must address these risk factors in order for students to achieve academic success. Many students in Clear Water’s alternative setting experience multiple risk factors, which, in turn, have created obstacles for their futures. Most of these children are forced to become responsible young adults without the needed foundations and emotional wellbeing to prepare them for adulthood. Consequently, they may present with behaviors that are negative and sometimes even criminal. Because these students will soon reach adulthood, there is an urgent need for effective educational support. Educators need to ensure that we are not contributing to their failures in our schools and instead are providing them with the necessary tools for success.

**Positionality**

As the researcher in this project, I am currently a school principal pursuing a Doctor of Education (Ed D) degree in Leadership. Today, as the principal of a small elementary school, I am interested in implementing a school environment that is utilizing effective practices that lead to student success. At the outset of this project, I was serving as the principal of the alternative school in the district. I sought to conduct a study on the impact the alternative school was having on students who presented with the highest risk behaviors in the school district. This study also allowed me to consider how I can proactively apply this acquired knowledge to a school that serves a younger population. With a better understanding of risk factors that disengage students, I can attempt to intervene more effectively with a younger population of students.

**Research Questions**

This research project first investigated the current literature on risk factors of students who attended alternative schools and the effective practices used in urban, alternative settings.
Based on criteria established through the review of existing literature and best practices, this project subsequently conducted a program evaluation of Urban High School. In order to have a basis for this evaluation, the following questions guided the literature review:

- What are the most effective research-based interventions and practices needed to reduce dropout risk for urban students in an alternative setting?
- Based on critical theory perspective, what policies, interventions and practices used in alternative settings enhance education equity and equality, or contribute to the challenges that students’ experience?

In addition, the following research questions guided the empirical portion of this study:

1. How do students experience Urban High School?
2. How has the new alternative program implemented in the Clear Water Public School District impacted students’ grades, attendance, behavior, and overall school performance?
3. How does the design and implementation of Urban High School compare to the criteria of effective practices established through a review of the literature?
4. How do the practices used at Urban High School address educational equality and equity?

The program evaluation analyzed and compared the design and operations of Urban High School to effective practices, and then identified recommendations for the program based on the findings from this research. The evaluation documented key components, such as the assets, achievements, merits, challenges and the needs of the program, to determine whether the current conditions are conducive to a successful program—according to criteria established in the literature.
Theoretical Framework

Program Theory and Critical Theory provided valuable insights for the study. Program Theory explained the theory behind the creation of Urban High and organized the evaluation. Critical theory provided the baselines for social inquiry aimed at ensuring Urban High is increasing opportunity for students and helping them overcome their imbedded obstacles. I describe each theory further in this section and apply them to the proposed study.

Program Theory

According to Weiss (1998), in a program evaluation, it is important to understand the “theoretical premises on which the program was based” (p. 55). Theory-based evaluation identifies the key service components and expected program outcomes. It also provides an opportunity to identify the desired outcomes that these service components were intended to have. As Weiss (1998) describes, “these services, outcomes and the hypothesized links between them are the basis for developing a program model or theory” (p. 56). Theory in this usage refers to a program logic model, or “theory of change” that represents a “plausible and sensible model of how the program is supposed to work” (Bickman, 1987). Urban High was developed with a specific purpose to fulfill a need within the district. In order to organize this evaluation, “it is useful to know not only what the program is expected to achieve but also how it expects to achieve it” (Weiss, 1998, p.55). Program theory becomes the framework to guide the development, implementation and interpretation of the evaluation.

In order to help students overcome dropout risk factors, schools need to provide strategies and interventions that not only address their academic needs, but also interventions that address their emotional well-being. Besides addressing external risk factors, another challenge schools like Urban High face is helping students discover, believe, and work towards their individual
potential. Many of the students live in gang- and drug-infested neighborhoods with high crime rates, and nearly 100% of them have free or reduced lunch status. Students who attend Urban High School come to school with a history of negative experiences that have threatened their safety and wellbeing. These students may need a fresh start that acknowledges their challenges and gives them opportunities to be successful.

The theoretical base of this evaluation study was the implicit and explicit program implementation theories that underlie the Urban High School Program (Weiss, 1998). These theories help provide an understanding of who the program served, why it was created, and what it was meant to do. Thus, this component of the theoretical framework allowed this study to summarize the program’s strategies and interventions. It also allowed the study to assess the program against its own goals and expectations (Wholey, 1987). Program theory provided a point of reference for comparison of what had actually been implemented and provided data for future changes. This study evaluated the resources, activities, and goals, as well as attempted to identify the “mechanism of change” or the response that the resources, activities and goals had on the program (Weiss, 1998, p. 55).

**Urban High Program Theory**

Urban High School is currently going into the end of its fifth year of implementation. Due to political and community demand, the program was developed three weeks prior to its opening to service high risk students in the Clear Water School District. There was an immediate need to create a program to service students who had been attending the dismantled alternative program in the district. Prior to attending the alternative school, these students were excluded from the district’s mainstream schools. Because I had clinical experience working in alternative programs, I collaborated in the development of the program. I had also worked at the dismantled
alternative school and was familiar with the specific needs of the students who were attending the program. With the political support of the district’s central administration and the school committee, Urban High was created to service students who were deemed “a danger to others” in the Clear Water Public School District.

Historian Larry Cuban wrote in *School, The Story of American Public Education* (2001), “John Dewey believed that if schools were anchored in the whole child, in the social, intellectual, emotional, and physical development of a child, teaching would be different—and learning would be different and schools would be very different, hospitable places for children” (p. 77). Urban High School was developed with the belief that the difficulties students had in mainstream schools were caused by their unmet needs. Urban High was designed with the intention of implementing interventions to help students with these needs in order for them to be academically successful.

Figure 1 provides a visual outline of Urban High’s program theory used during the development of the school. The diagram illustrates the guiding program implementation and the insight for the key decision points that were made during its development. The diagram is broken down into three columns.

The first column lists the risk factors and their causes, which will be described in the literature review. These factors can lead to school disengagement and ultimately dropout. For example, the diagram illustrates the idea that circumstances, such as poverty, neglect, and unmet needs, have led to some students experiencing risk factors that have manifested into behavioral issues. These behavioral issues have made it difficult for students to be successful in the traditional school setting, subsequently causing expulsion and referral to the alternative school. In response to the risk factors, the diagram describes the interventions and program activities
implemented at Urban High School, with the hope that it would lead to success or the “mechanism of change” (Weiss, 1998). The stated goal of the program was to provide students with academic tools and individualized support, in order for them to experience a better quality of life that would evolve into academic success and, ultimately, high school graduation.

The second column lists the implemented program activities and interventions and the resources and stakeholders needed to support these implementations. For example, support from the school committee and superintendent was needed to provide the necessary resources for the program to function. Because of the challenging population Urban High was looking to serve, there was a need for dedicated and committed staff, along with professional development that focused on the specific needs of students who attended. Community partners and agencies, such as counseling services, were utilized to help support specialized needs of students.

The third column describes the intended program outcomes. For example, the overall outcome is having students graduate successfully from high school. The theory or belief is that the interventions would change a potentially negative outcome into a positive one, ultimately preventing dropout.

Below is a brief explanation of the interventions implemented at Urban High along with their intended program outcome. These interventions are listed in the second column of the diagram.

- **Behavioral System** - A behavioral system that reinforces positive behavior was developed by the researcher, using pieces of different behavior systems utilized in other educational and residential settings. It is based on a “token system,” in which students earned points for appropriate behaviors during each academic period. Students were able to climb up the level system by earning a certain percentage of points. As students climbed the level
system, they earned additional privileges and were able to use the points they had earned to purchase items in a school store.

- The theory was that the behavioral system would increase appropriate behaviors in school, allowing them to focus more on learning, subsequently leading to academic success and positive academic experiences.

- **Credit Recovery Opportunity**: Students were given opportunities to make up credits to get them back on track to graduate on time with peers their own age.
  - Retention is a documented risk factor to dropout. The theory was that providing students with opportunities to “catch up” would reduce the likelihood of dropout.

- **Closely Monitored Attendance**: An attendance officer was identified to focus on students who would attend Urban High. The attendance officer’s role was to monitor attendance on a daily basis, meet with students, and pick up students, if they did not come to school.
  - Another documented dropout risk factor, improving attendance, would increase academic success and reduce the likelihood of dropping out of school.

- **Close Relationship with Probation/Court**: A team approach was implemented by organizing weekly interactions with students’ probation officers to provide updates and recommendations.
  - Most of the students who are referred to the alternative school are court involved or have probation officers. At this level, the juvenile justice system is focused on rehabilitation and helping juveniles. Having ongoing communication with probation officers may create incentives and increase students’ motivation to make better decisions. This team approach can improve academic success and
prove helpful for the community in which these students live by reducing delinquent behaviors.

- **College Pathway and Exposure**- Interest assessments, college exploration, college visits, and ongoing discussions about postsecondary education provided students with options they may have never considered before.
  - Expanding exposure of college opportunities may help students set positive and productive goals. To achieve a goal of attending college requires students to be successful in secondary school and may help motivate students to work on issues that impede their progress.

- **Parent Engagement Contract**- A contract was drawn between parents, school, and student, outlining expectations and a team approach to the student’s academic success. Part of the contract asked parents to agree to come into school at least three times during the year to discuss their child’s progress.
  - Outlining parent expectations may help increase parent participation. Many of the issues that students have who come to alternative settings are connected to home life, or are extensions of traumas or existing circumstances. Creating partnerships and positive relationships with parents may help parents become receptive to accepting services and may also help parents encourage students to engage in positive study habits and attend school, which will lead to academic success.

- **Individual and Group Counseling**- Students were offered both individual and group counseling to help address their social and emotional needs.
  - The belief is that counseling can help students begin to work on issues that may be negatively impacting their lives. If they begin to identify triggers and coping
strategies to deal with their frustration, anger may not manifest into negative behaviors. Counseling can also identify additional interventions that students may need to overcome challenges and obstacles.

- **Safe and Positive School Environment**- Students’ previous actions that had excluded them from their neighborhood schools were not “held against them.” Students were treated with respect and provided a safe environment with high standards.
  - The theory is that a safe and positive school environment will help motivate students to attend school, while also producing an environment conducive to learning.

- **Academic Assessments**- Students were assessed to identify any gaps in learning and unidentified special education needs.
  - The theory is that students may have additional academic needs that may need support. Identifying these needs and understanding students’ academic levels can help teachers focus their instruction and create better teacher-student relationships. Addressing these unidentified needs can help students improve their academic success and help them feel better about attending school.

- **Extra Help after School**- Students were given the opportunity to stay after school for extra academic support. Students were also able to make up any missing work caused by absences and work on credit recovery during this time.
  - The theory is that providing students with opportunities for extra help will help them with academic success. Students who fall behind in their classes become discouraged and begin to disengage from school. Keeping students engaged in their education will lead to academic success.
Theoretical Framework of Program Theory

Clear Water Public Schools
Urban High Program Theory

Risk Factors and Causes

Poverty
Gangs/Drug Infested Neighborhoods
Mental Health Needs
Unmet Special Ed. Needs
Weak Family Support
Neglect/Abuse

Inappropriate Behaviors
Behind in Credits/Retention
Poor Attendance
Court Involved
Lack of Family Involvement
Lack of Future Educational Goals/Employment
Untreated Medical and Mental Health Needs
Negative School Attitudes
Gaps in Learning

Implementation Theory
Program Activities

Needed Support for Intervention (Stakeholders)
School Committee
Superintendent
Resources
Dedicated Staff
Professional Development
Community Partners

Behavioral System
Credit Recovery Opportunity
Closely Monitored Attendance
Close Relationship with Probation/Courts
College Pathway and Exposure
Parent Engagement Contract
Individual/Group Counseling
Safe and Positive School Climate
Academic Assessment
Extra Help after School

Interventions lead to the outcomes in the next column

Mechanism of Change

Dropout Prevention
Graduate from High School

Appropriate Behaviors for school setting, more academic success
Make up credits and graduate with class
Come to school more, do better in school, and experience academic success
More parent involvement, work as a team and student will receive needed support
Student feels safe and positive about school, will come, and experience success
Students will receive mental health and medical support, which will improve quality of life and allow them to focus on education
Will learn about college, set and focus on goals, believe in themselves, and graduate
Get necessary academic support, pass classes

Figure 1: Theoretical framework of program theory.
Critical Theory

In my research, I drew upon Critical Theory—a broad social theory that focuses on the imbalance of power and works toward critiquing and changing society so that it becomes fair, just, and humane for all (Giroux, 2001; McLaren, 1999). Critical Theory can be traced back to the Frankfurt School in the early-twentieth century which was built on the beliefs of Karl Marx from the 1800s (Geuss, 1981). Since then, critical theory has branched out into the world of education as theorists continue to build on the belief that through education you can empower the oppressed. Paulo Freire (1992), who is noted for his work on the “culture of silence,” stated, “One of the tasks of the progressive educator … is to unveil opportunities for hope, no matter what the obstacles may be” (p. 8). Modern critical theorists such as Henry Giroux, Peter McLaren, and Michael Apple study and lecture on curriculum and “critical pedagogy” in an attempt to empower teachers to think critically when teaching students (Apple, 1995; Giroux, 2001; McLaren, 1999). Critical theory needs to be used to guide a program evaluation of a school that is providing disenfranchised students opportunities to succeed. As Freire (1992) argues, part of the job of educators is to “unveil opportunities for hope,” and I agree.

This study evaluated a program that is trying to reduce dropouts. Critical theory is necessary to understand both the origin and causes of the problem and to understand the best way to intervene. Being a dropout increases the obstacles that individuals experience in life because it increases the social inequity of individuals. The causes of dropout can be considered unjust because these causes are a result of unmet needs that the population in this study faces. Their experiences are specific to circumstances that exist in urban communities, such as issues of poverty, drug abuse, unemployment, low educational attainment, and other issues that impact the quality of life. Critical Theory is founded on the belief that we should have compassion for the
suffering of others (Giroux, 2001). To be fully committed to working with students at Urban High, individuals need to be dedicated and able to empathize with students.

Critical theorists would argue that research should aim to transform social injustices and help those who are impacted by social injustices (McLaren, 1999). Urban High is attempting to empower and change the direction of the path students were currently on. This study explores whether interventions and strategies used at Urban High break the cycle of educational inequality and offer students a meaningful and equitable education. Students who are attending Urban High need a lot of support in overcoming many obstacles to their education and social status. Critical theory believes and teaches that knowledge is power (Apple, 1995). We must appreciate and recognize that servicing an oppressed population—such as the one at Urban High—involves more than teaching academics. It also involves providing students with the skills and tools to overcome the adversity they experience. Providing students with a high quality education that sets postsecondary goals and educates them about the necessary steps to move forward is imperative to overcoming their challenges. Other critical theorists believe that schools are structured to benefit the upper class and protect their interests and knowledge (Apple, 1995; Friere, 1992; Giroux, 2001).

**Conclusion**

The concern in this study was whether students at Urban High benefit from the education that the school provides. I analyzed whether school practices provided students with a vision and the tools to achieve high quality of life standards or if practices supported educational inequity. In order to satisfy measures based in critical theory, structures, opportunities, attitudes, and interventions need to be directed toward breaking this cycle of inequity.
Chapter Two

Review of Literature

In order to prepare for a research project that moves towards evaluating an alternative school that supports dropout prevention, it was important to examine existing literature that has contributed to the understanding of the students who attend these settings, as well as the type of schools needed to support them. The literature describes the many impacts of dropout and how it factors into employment and earning potentials, the quality of life of these individuals, as well as the social and economic instability experienced (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). The literature also discusses the risk factors that accompany students who drop out, leading to the need for alternative settings to address some of these risk factors (Dynarski et al., 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Understanding the challenges that exist for students and administrators of alternative settings also guided the research project. The literature review includes bodies of research that discuss the issue of equity, specifically how practices in similar settings can either support equity or contribute to the inequities that exist in education within urban districts (Lee et al., 2002).

Several disciplines have studied the issues faced by alternative settings. Researchers include those who study juvenile crime (Cox et al., 1995), socio economic status (SES) and poverty in urban communities (Caspi et al., 1998), and other risk factors that students who attend alternative schools face (Rumberger, 2001). Educational researchers who study dropout, instructional practices, special education needs, school structures, and best practices are also major contributors to the discussion of alternative education. The literature review examines research contributions from all of these areas to provide a comprehensive foundation of data that
will guide the evaluation. In order to get a basis for my evaluation, the following questions guided the literature review:

- What are the impacts of dropout on students?
- What type of risk factors do students who attend alternative settings face?
- What are the most effective research-based interventions and practices needed to reduce dropout risk for urban students in an alternative setting?
- Based on Critical Theory perspective, what policies, interventions, and practices used in alternative settings enhance education equity and equality or contribute to the challenges students experience?

To help frame the discussion, the literature review begins with the historical perspective of dropout and its relationship with alternative settings. It also explores alternative pathways, which have been created as interventions to increase graduation rates. It describes the challenges that evaluating alternative programs have, including the many types of alternative programs that exist. Alternative programs may differ in the amount of resources as well as the philosophies behind their implementation.

One name that has reoccurred in literature reviews of studies and articles that discuss alternative education has been Mary Anne Raywid (1994) who pushed for alternative education and smaller schools that were more responsive to the individual needs of students. There also have been large-scale projects like the Alternative Pathway Project (2005), which outlined the critical need for alternative settings to increase graduation rates for school districts. As Hoye & Sturgis (2005) point out, projects such as the Alternative Pathways Project (APP), launched in 2005 by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, “are expanding across the country as part of the effort to re-enroll dropouts. These schools are learning what it takes to effectively support youth
in crisis, engage them in meaningful learning and prepare them for successful futures in college and work” (p. 5). In their study, Hoye & Sturgis (2005) also identified other organizations that worked on dropout recovery initiatives, such as “Youth Transition Funders Group, Jobs for the Future, National League of Cities’ Institute for Youth, Education and Families, America Youth Policy Forum and the Alternative High School Initiative” (p. 2). These organizations, along with many school districts, are acting on the belief that every child has a right to an education and every child can learn under the right circumstances.

One challenge of documenting and evaluating alternative pathways is the differences that exist from one program to another. To address this challenge, several national studies have collected data from different states, examining definitions of alternative schools, implementation, polices, structure, and funding from multiple alternative programs (Aron, 2006; Katsiyannis & Williams, 1998; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Lehr et al., 2004). These studies have made it clear that the number of alternative pathways and the number of students who attend these programs have increased. Studies have reported that there are over 10,300 alternative schools across districts in the United States that service more than 600,000 children (Carver & Lewis, 2010). Because of the large number of schools, and the differences in how states report on them, Lange & Sletten (2002) claim that “there is still very little consistent, wide-ranging evidence of their effectiveness or even an understanding of their characteristics” (p. 2). Generalization becomes difficult because of the differences from one school to the next. The challenges of evaluating alternative programs are also enhanced because of these same reasons. However, whatever the existing challenges may be, the impacts that dropout has on individuals are far more pressing and urgently need to be addressed.
Impacts of Dropout

One student drops out every 26 seconds in the United States and only 74.9% of U.S. freshmen who began public high school in 2004 graduated in 2007–08 (U.S. Department of Education, NCES, 2009). These statistics are even more alarming in urban communities. School graduation rates are 15 percentage points lower in urban districts when compared with districts in the suburbs (Swanson, 2010). Dropping out of school is related to a number of negative outcomes that impact individuals and their communities including employment opportunities, lifetime earnings, and quality of life. Dropout also has negative implications on social issues as well as the nation’s economy. Reviewing a body of literature that discusses the impact of dropout demonstrates the urgency of creating interventions, such as alternative pathways, to help increase graduation rates. The research presented on the impacts of dropout also indicates that there is a need to continue to analyze existing solutions and determine whether they are being effective in reducing dropout. As the literature will show, dropout affects us in many ways, demonstrating a need for inquiry and solutions.

Earnings, employment, and the economy. There are many negative outcomes associated with dropout. Most individuals who drop out from high school do not have the necessary skills and qualifications to succeed in today's complex work settings (Caspi et al., 1998; U.S. Department of Education, 2001). Dropouts are also less likely to be employed than those with a high school diploma or higher (U.S. Department of Labor, 2010). In a population survey conducted by the U.S. Department of Labor in 2006, the unemployment rate for high school dropouts was 32.9%, compared to 8.4% of high school graduates who were in college (U.S. Department of Labor, 2006). Previous studies have also shown that dropout impacts individuals’ lifelong earnings. In 2005, the average income of individuals between the ages 18
and 65 who had not completed high school was $20,100, compared to the average income of $29,700 of those who had completed high school, including a General Educational Development (GED) certificate (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008). Over a lifetime, dropouts can look forward to earnings of $260,000 less than a high school graduate (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008).

There are local and national economic costs associated with dropouts. Locally, the United States and its communities experience a dearth of trained and productive workers able to work in highly qualified positions (Bridgeland et al., 2006). In the course of their lifetimes, it is estimated that dropouts will cost the nation more than $319 billion in lost wages (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2008). In addition to lost wages, Laird et al., (2001) found that “young adults with low education and skill levels are more likely to live in poverty and to receive government assistance,” and “high school dropouts are likely to stay on public assistance longer than those with at least a high school degree” (p. 62). America’s Promise Alliance estimates that the federal government will spend $45 billion of tax revenues on welfare payments, public health services, and dealing with crime (America’s Promise Alliance, 2008). Sources also believe that increasing the graduation rate in the United States by just 5% could lead to a combined savings of almost $8 billion in revenue each year by reducing crime-related costs (Alliance for Excellent Education, 2006). These predictions are supported by data collected on incarcerated individuals, which indicate that approximately 30% of federal inmates, 40% of state prisoners, and 50% of persons on death row are high school dropouts (U.S. Department of Justice, 2002).

**Risk factors of students who attend alternative settings.** A research project that aims to explore the impact of a program on its participants must also understand the risk factors that the participants experience. This section of the review of literature demonstrates that disengagement and dropout are complex issues and are usually caused by a combination of many
factors. Individual factors such as academic performance, truancy, behavioral problems, and socioeconomic (SES) factors play into dropout.

**Complex and multiple risk factors.** There has been extensive research on risk factors of dropout. Before discussing these risk factors, it is important to consider the broad concept of “at risk” or “risk factors.” Researchers create broad definitions of risk factors including a number of different variables (Entwistle et al., 1997; Jimerson et al., 2000). In one national survey conducted by Katsiyannis & Williams (1998), a long list of descriptors was created to identify students considered to be at risk of school failure. The list included factors such as: “expelled, suspended, pregnant, homeless, migrant, delinquent, disruptive, dangerous to self or others, in need of remedial education, or released from a correctional facility, truant, unmotivated, academically deficient, having behavior problems” (p. 279). This list of factors correlates with students who attend alternative programs because many of them are referred for these reasons.

Even though there is a long list of risk factors, many studies have shown that there is no single reason why students drop out of high school. Instead, it is a complex issue that relates to individual aspects of the students’ lives, such as their families, schools, and communities (Franklin, 1992; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Other studies have shown that dropping out of school is a long process of disengagement that begins many years before students actually drop out (Entwistle et al., 1997; Jimerson et al., 2000). One of these studies argued that that process of disengagement starts prior to the child’s entrance to school (Jimerson et al., 2000).

**Socio-economic status (SES).** There have been studies that have identified low socio economic status as a risk factor for drop out. Researchers have shown that dropout rates are higher among students in urban school districts like Clear Water than in rural or suburban schools because of low socio economic status (SES) (Ingrum, 2006; Rumberger, 1983). One of
those studies found a correlation between dropout and family income (Rumberger, 1983). This same study also contended that parents’ educational attainments are related to dropping out (Rumberger, 1983). In addition, studies have found students whose families receive public assistance and who live in poor neighborhoods are more at risk of dropping out (Mare, 1980). One study in particular stressed the connection between drop out and the negative influence of poor communities. Children who live in poor communities are more likely to have friends that dropout (Rumberger, 2001). In their study, Wehlage et al. (1989) emphasized a disparity between the experiences of students who live in poverty and those who do not by highlighting the “incongruence in the skills and knowledge” which are “often taken for granted by people who have grown up in more affluent surroundings” (p. 58). They further argue in their study that “Success in school often means rejecting family and peers, and for the majority, this choice is unacceptable” (p. 60).

**Poor academic performance, retention, and truancy.** To help narrow the discussion and focus on risk factors that students experience in school, indicators such as poor school attendance, limited academic success, and negative behaviors will be described. Studies that have reported that, even though socio-economic status contributes to risk factors, it is less significant than risk factors such as attendance, school failure, and credit accumulation (Cahill, et al., 2006; Roderick, 2006). The significance of this research is that it empowers districts and schools to intervene, because schools have control over risk factors such as attendance and school failure. It can work with students on these issues and keep them on a path to graduation (MetisNet, 2008).

Of the many risk factors, three risk factors that schools can address are: poor academic performance, retention, and truancy. Poor academic performance, which includes poor test
scores and course failure, has been linked to drop out (Barro & Kolstad, 1987; Ekstrom et al., 1986). Poor academic performance can also perpetuate other dropout risk factors such as retention, which is usually caused by failing grades (Alexander et al., 1999).

Retention has been found to be more of a predictor of risk factors than individual, family, and school factors (Alexander et al., 1999; Jimerson, 1999; Lee & Burkam, 1992; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998). Research has shown that students who are retained in school or fall behind in credits in high school are five times more likely to drop out (Duffrin, 2003). There is also literature that predicts retention in specific grades. According to Roderick (1994), “repeating a grade from kindergarten to sixth grade significantly increases the odds of dropping out, (p. 729). Other sources, such as the National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES, 2007), believe that students who are retained are twice as likely to drop out of school as those who have not been retained.

Truancy is an indicator of dropout and is one of the risk factors many student in alternative schools have (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). For obvious reasons, truancy can also lead to retention. If students do not attend, they fall behind academically and become at risk for retention. Studies have shown that besides leading to dropout, truancy is one of the early warning signs of students who are headed toward delinquent activity, social isolation, suspension, and in some cases expulsion (Huizinga et al., 2000; Rumberger, 2001).

Studies have shown that schools can improve attendance by making students feel less anonymous and by showing them that it is important to attend class and implementing high expectations to attend school (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Providing students with a structured and supportive classroom can also increase attendance. Some studies found that students are more likely to skip class if they perceive the class to be disorganized or if they do not believe
teachers care about them (Duckwork & DeJung, 1989). All of these studies agree that schools and staff do have an impact on student attendance.

**Behavior issues.** Another common dropout risk factor for students who attend alternative programs like the one in this study is behavioral issues in and outside of the school setting. According to one study (Sweeten, 2006), “a first-time arrest during high school nearly doubles the odds of a student dropping out, while a court appearance nearly quadruples those odds” (p. 474). Many of the students who attend alternative school have presented with negative behaviors prior to their enrollment at their alternative school (Leone & Drakeford, 1999). Behaviors in elementary school, as early as first grade, have been considered early indicators of drop out (Jimerson et al., 2000). Once students reach the secondary level, they are referred to alternative settings for their negative behaviors. According to a National Center for Educational Statistics (NCES) survey conducted by Carver & Lewis (2010), the majority of reasons for alternative placements were due to physical fights, possession, distribution or use of alcohol or drugs, disruptive verbal behavior, or the possession or use of a weapon other than a firearm (p. 4). The survey also found that 80% of school districts with alternative schools reported working with the criminal justice system and/or with community mental health agencies (Carver & Lewis, 2010).

**Types of Alternative Schools**

In order to prevent dropout and address the risk factors previously discussed, districts have created alternative schools. However, *alternative* is a broad term that can mean many different things. In order to help form a clear understanding of alternative education, the following section defines the different types of alternative schools and describes how different districts may utilize them to support students. This section also describes the research that
supports alternative education as a dropout strategy, such as the specific type of school that this study evaluated. This literature is important for comparison purposes, as well as understanding the program’s effectiveness.

Alternative education is not a new concept in the United States. Alternative education is known to have been implemented as early as colonial America, when the wealthy and religious groups offered it, through a variety of methods, to the general public (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2001). Alternative education, broadly defined, includes many different educational programs outside the traditional K-12 school setting (Aron, 2006). The Common Core of Data database under the U.S. Department of Education (2002) defines an alternative education school as “a public elementary/secondary school that addresses needs of students that typically cannot be met in a regular school, provides nontraditional education, serves as an adjunct to a regular school, or falls outside the categories of regular, special education or vocational education” (Table 2, p. 14). Some of these alternative schools and pathways include charter schools, magnet schools, private schools, GED programs, and even home schooling.

In recent years, school districts around the country continue to create alternative schools to service those students who are not successful in traditional school settings, reinforcing the belief that everyone can learn from the National Commission on Excellence in Education report, A Nation at Risk (1983). Raywid (2001) reported that beginning in the 1970s, alternative schools were “the prospective solution to a variety of the nation’s ills” (p. 192). Today, more and more alternative schools are serving students who have not been successful in mainstream settings and who have been “disruptive” and “expelled” from them (Lehr et al., 2004). In addition to serving challenging students, the number of alternative schools has grown significantly over the past
decade because they are being designed as part of a school district's “comprehensive dropout prevention program” (Carver & Lewis, 2011).

Alternative schools are discussed in dropout prevention literature, because they have key characteristics that aim to address the needs of students at risk of dropping out (Lange & Sletten, 2002). Even though schools may differ, there are key characteristics that are considered effective strategies for preventing dropout in any school, such as small school and class size, emphasis on caring relationships between teachers and students, and clear rules and expectations (Barr, 1981; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Lange & Sletten, 2002; National Dropout Prevention Center, 2001). The research is clear that these characteristics can help address the risk factors that lead to dropout. More importantly, by taking nontraditional approaches, alternative schools are attempting to work with those students who were not successful in traditional and mainstream settings.

Even though there is substantial research that supports alternative education as a positive option for many students, there is also research that argues against its effectiveness and success. According to Lange & Sletten (2002), “research indicates the academic outcomes for students who attend alternative programs vary in scope and method” (p. 22). There have been additional studies that alternative programs can lack rigor, are not consistently effective, lack generalization, and do not focus on long-term results (Cox et al., 1995; Lange & Sletten, 2002). Barr (1981) cautions: “Alternative schools represent some of the most unfortunate tendencies toward social tracking, political manipulation, and educational hucksterism” (p. 571).

While alternative schools continue to evolve as a type of dropout prevention strategy, there is a need to continue collecting data about alternative settings and the population of students who attend these schools.
After studying a number of alternative school models, Hefner-Packer (1991) describes five models of different structures of alternative schools:

- **The Alternative Classroom**, designed as a self-contained classroom within a traditional school, simply offering varied programs in a different environment;

- **The School-Within-a-School**, housed within a traditional school, but having semiautonomous or specialized educational programs;

- **The Separate Alternative School**, separated from the regular school and having different academic and social adjustment programs;

- **The Continuation School**, developed for students no longer attending traditional schools, such as street academics for job-related training or parenting centers; and

- **The Magnet School**, a self-contained program offering an intensified curriculum in one or more subject areas, such as math or science. (p. 22)

Raywid (1994), writing a synthesis of Research for Educational Leadership, provides another descriptive listing of popular alternative schools. The three types she describes are:

**TYPE I: Schools of Choice**, models range from schools-within-schools to magnet schools, offering different specialized learning opportunities for students and those seeking an innovative or challenging curriculum.

**TYPE II: Last Chance Schools**, designed to provide continued education program options for disruptive students; characterized by discipline, which aims to segregate, contain, and reform disruptive students. Students do not typically choose to attend. Since placement is short-term, the curriculum is limited to a few basics.

**TYPE III: Remedial Schools**, focus is on the student’s need for academic remediation or social rehabilitation, targeting specific populations. Program provides counseling
services to address behavioral barriers to learning. These schools are more therapeutic than TYPE II schools. (p. 26)

Based on its mission and vision, Urban High appears to fall under Hefner-Packer’s (1991) third type of alternative school (Separate Alternative School) and Raywid’s (1994) combination of Type II and Type III categories (Last Chance School, Remedial School). For the purpose of this project, the concept of alternative schooling refers to systems that support disruptive and at-risk students who have not been successful in traditional school settings. Students at Urban High have been excluded from their mainstream school or have displayed disruptive behaviors, etc. This practice of exclusions is shared by many school districts.

According to the literature, most school districts in the country utilize alternative schools to service similar student populations (Kleiner, Porch, & Farris, 2002).

**Effective Practices and Interventions in Urban Districts**

Graduation rates in urban school districts are lower than in suburban school districts. In 2008, the Cities in Crisis report found that only 61% of students in urban districts graduated from high school in four years compared to the national average of 71% (America’s Promise Alliance, 2008). The 2010 four-year cohort graduation rate for Massachusetts public high schools was 82.1% for the 2009 cohort (DESE, 2010). Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) reported that Clear Water Public School’s four-year 2010 graduation rate was 53.5% (DESE, 2010). In Massachusetts, there is almost a 30% difference between the state average and Clear Water. This difference parallels the national trend of significantly lower graduation rates in urban districts. Consequently, urban districts across the country need to identify interventions and best practices that can increase graduation rates.
Schools do not have control over risk factors such as socio economic status (SES), race/ethnicity, gender, or family circumstances; however, academic risk factors such as absenteeism, grade retention, truancy, and low academic performance can be impacted by school interventions (Lee & Burkam, 2003). Most Urban High students exhibited negative behaviors that led to their enrollment at Urban High. Many are court involved due to truancy, habitual school offences, and delinquencies (Leone & Drakeford, 1999). It is imperative that interventions and practices address these issues.

**Alternative Schools as a Dropout Intervention**

As noted earlier, alternative schooling is on the 15 Effective Strategies for school improvement and dropout prevention list, published by the National Dropout Prevention Center, (NDPC) (2001). Some researchers argue that additional effective alternative schools for students who are not successful in traditional settings would result in fewer dropouts (Reimer & Cash, 2003). According to Jacqueline Ancess and Suzanna Wichterle (2001), five key elements are fundamental to student success and dropout reduction:

1. Small school size, which supports more positive teacher-student relationships.
2. Small class size, enabling teachers to provide a challenging curriculum for all students.
3. Intellectual habits of mind that mark the school as an intellectual community.
4. Portfolio assessments that allow students to demonstrate their learning in multiple and complex ways.
5. Staff members chosen for their commitment to the school's mission and beliefs about teaching and learning (p. 653).
As many states begin to recognize that alternative schools play an important role in addressing dropout rates, they have begun to conduct their own studies on the effectiveness and accountability of schools within their states. The Iowa Association of Alternative Education (2002) reported that they had a reduction in students who dropped out when alternative schools were customized for at-risk students. The study also discovered that in addition to graduating 66% of students, 37% of the students also enrolled in some form of postsecondary education (p. 211). Some states have even developed evaluation criteria for accountability. Kentucky Department of Education developed an evaluation guidebook to address alternative school accountability that included three domains, with each domain having three standards with 58 indicators (Swarts, 2002). These domains and standards included Academic Performance, Learning Environment, and an Efficiency Domain, which included leadership, organizational structure and resources, and comprehensive and effective planning (pp. 22-23).

Research also documented overall characteristics of effective alternative schools. There have also been studies that focused on whether or not alternative programs were effective in addressing their intended goals, including that of providing dropout intervention (Zweig, 2003). For example, Zweig (2003) argues that there should be “clarity about the purpose of the school and how it is supposed to improve outcomes” (p. 8).

Longitudinal studies have evaluated alternative settings and identified key elements of effective settings. For example, the state of North Carolina (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2001) conducted a comprehensive evaluation that expanded over five years. Their findings are similar to those of other researchers. Some of the characteristics of successful alternative schools listed in the report included: strong sense of purpose and mission; caring and committed staff; dynamic leadership; collegiality with faculty and students; low teacher/student ratio allowing
more individual attention; individualized and personalized learning; emotional, physical, and academic needs of students addressed; flexibility; creative strategies for course offerings; and strong community connections (pp. 12-15).

As previously discussed, alternative schools that serve students with specific needs and risk factors need to be structured and designed with effective dropout strategies in mind. Important features of effective alternative schools include, but are not limited to, small school sizes, committed teachers, and low staff to student ratio. The following section will discuss these specific characteristics in addition to interventions that focus on student needs, such as poor academic performance, retention, truancy, and negative behaviors.

**School size.** Studies have shown that small school size impacts dropout (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Wehlage et al., 1989). Other studies have found that when compared to larger schools, small schools tend to graduate 15-20% more students (Cahill et al., 2006). Research has found that small school size can have positive impacts such as decreasing discipline problems, promoting a better sense of community, and fostering positive student and teacher relationships (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Natriello et al., 1990). In smaller settings, teachers have more opportunities to build relationships with individual students. Interventions such as close supervision and student mentoring are considered feasible (Tyler & Lofstrom, 2009). Drawbacks to small school size include a reduced number of staff and limited resources, because of a low number of students. Course offerings are frequently limited to core academic courses that are state requirements, such as math, English, and science. It is difficult for small schools to offer a broader range of courses beyond the basics. However, researchers have concluded that the benefits of large schools with the additional courses do not compensate for the high percentage of dropouts (Pittman & Haughwout, 1987).
Teachers and school staff. Teachers and other school staff in alternative settings need to have appropriate skills, a genuine belief in student success, and an understanding of the students who attend the alternative setting. Research shows that staff skills and interactions with students are important components of successful programs (Price & Doney, 2009). One study also emphasized that when students perceived their teachers as being “high quality,” chances of dropout decreased (Rumberger & Thomas, 2000). More importantly, when students believed teachers cared and believed in their success, students are more academically successful (Muller, 2001; Ryan & Patrick, 2001; Wehlage et al., 1989).

Another important factor in a successful alternative setting is ongoing training for staff to ensure they are prepared to work with an at-risk population (Ashcroft, 1999). It is important for personnel to recognize that students in these settings have not been successful in traditional learning environments. These students may not learn in the same way and may benefit from nontraditional approaches. A report released by the National Dropout Prevention Center (2007) described key elements and strategies of exemplary programs, including a provision of “quality staff training in program philosophy, strategies, and materials” (p. 52). However, even though alternative schools have identified the need for alternative practices, according to a survey administered to alternative schools in the United States, only 30% of school districts have special teaching requirements in alternative schools (Carver & Lewis, 2010).

Effective alternative school interventions. Dropout is a complex process of social and academic failures, which suggests that reducing dropout rates will also require comprehensive approaches that take into account student needs and risk factors (Rumberger, 2001). Emotional and behavioral needs are common with students in these settings, and interventions need to consider students’ social, cultural, and developmental backgrounds (Warren et al., 2003). The
level of need for intervention is greater in urban alternative schools because there are a higher percentage of students who present with negative behaviors (Sugai & Horner, 1999; Warren et al., 2003). These schools require more intensive strategies including behavioral monitoring and behavioral interventions (Sugai & Horner, 1999; Turnbull et al., 2002). According to a report developed by Hammond et al., (2007), one of the key strategies of exemplary programs is to provide “some form of behavior modification to change problem behaviors” (p. 54).

Students with emotional issues may require long-term investments rather than short-term interventions. Some authors suggest that effective alternative programs implementing these long-term interventions should provide individual and group counseling (Hughes et al., 2006). Counseling services can help address risk factors such as substance abuse, anger issues, and other emotional issues that have manifested into inappropriate behaviors that have led the student to the alternative setting. Studies have also shown that linking students to agencies and collateral supports is vitally important for addressing students’ needs (Dynarski et al., 1998; Leone & Drakeford, 1999).

**Educational Equity and High Expectations**

This study looks to evaluate an alternative program and determine if beliefs, attitudes, and practices support educational equity and equality. There have been few studies that have explored educational equity in alternative schools. Studies that exist focus on the demographic makeup of schools, especially in urban districts with high-minority student populations and high-poverty concentrations (NCES, 2002). These demographics make students vulnerable to social, political, economic, and educational inequalities because they are segregated into alternative programs (Gregg, 1999).
However, this study is concerned with the educational equity with regard to beliefs and access to an equitable education. It is important that both staff and school believe that minority students with challenging backgrounds deserve the same high expectations and academic rigor as students in mainstream education settings (Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). In one study which utilized critical theory as its theoretical framework, Kim & Taylor (2008) examined an alternative school to determine whether the school benefited students and worked toward breaking “the cycle of educational inequality” (p. 206). They found that even though the “school provided a caring environment for students, it did not offer meaningful and equitable alternative education that benefited students” (p. 207). This study believed rigor and access were not equitable (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

As more and more alternative programs are created to support students who are not successful in regular educational settings, we need to ensure we are offering all students what they need to succeed. The National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (2000) describes this goal thus: “All students, regardless of their personal characteristics, backgrounds, or physical challenges, must have opportunities to study and learn. Equity does not mean that every student should receive identical instruction; instead, it demands that reasonable and appropriate accommodations be made as needed to promote access and attainment for all students” (p. 12). Even though this study applied to special education students, it also can apply to students in alternative settings.

Providing students with equitable education through high expectations and high-quality instruction prevents dropouts. One study showed that students will do better in school when teachers hold high expectations for them (Catalano et al., 2004). Other researchers have also found that when high standards are set and enforced students will be less likely to drop out of
school (Benz et al., 2000). Assignments that challenge students and require them to utilize their skills subsequently build confidence and increase their desire and motivation to learn (Brophy, 2004). Assuring students with challenges and obstacles that they can be academically successful and achieve high standards is important in alternative schools. Many of these students have not experienced success and may not believe they are capable of it. Studies have shown that the stigma attached to students who attend alternative settings may impede their success (Arnové & Stout, 1980). Providing students in alternative settings with a meaningful education that sets the same standards of success and postsecondary outcomes as mainstream schools is crucial (Leone & Drakeford, 1999).

Summary

The problem of dropout is not a new topic for the United States. In 1963, President Kennedy initiated a national summer dropout campaign to increase awareness of the problem and asked local school districts to begin recovering and preventing dropouts (U.S. Department of Health, Education, and Welfare, 1964). However, even in the twenty-first century, dropout and its impacts continue to be a problem. Preventing dropout is a priority for many school districts, as standards and accountability have become priorities. Subsequently, strategies such as creating alternative pathways for students to obtain their high school diploma have evolved. Alternative programs attempt to service those students who have not typically been successful in traditional educational settings. Many of these students have multiple risk factors that increase their risk of dropping out of school. However, schools can effectively address specific risk factors such as attendance and school performance.

Alternative schools differ from district to district due to the varying missions and structures of alternative schools. Effectiveness can be challenging to define and measure because
of these differences. Effectiveness for one school may indeed be a measure of mediocrity for another. Evaluations of these schools need to take into account the specific needs and goals of each school. However, there are specific strategies and interventions that have been discussed in the literature that have been effective in alternative settings. These include small school size, caring and committed teachers, and interventions to address emotional and behavioral needs. Educational equity is also important to consider when evaluating alternative schools because these schools tend to service populations that include high percentages of minority students and students of low socio economic status. Consequently, alternative schools need to incorporate positive strategies built on high expectations, rigorous instruction, and the belief that students can be successful.
Chapter Three

Research Design

Research Questions

This research project was designed to evaluate a current dropout prevention strategy implemented by a school district in New England. The program attempted to meet the specific individual needs of attending students. Created in 2008, Urban High School services students who have been excluded from their neighborhood schools for unsafe behaviors. This systematic, formative assessment identified, documented, and consolidated the program’s strengths, as well as identified weak areas that needed improvement. This study described strategies and interventions used, as well as analyzed how they influence students’ lives. It also compared practices and interventions utilized at Urban High to current research on effective practices used in alternative settings that serve similar at-risk student populations. The four research questions were:

1. How do students experience Urban High School?
2. How has the new alternative program implemented in the Clear Water Public School District impacted students’ grades, attendance, behavior, and overall school performance?
3. How does the design and implementation of Urban High School compare to the criteria of effective practices established through a review of the literature?
4. How do the practices used at Urban High School address educational equality and equity?

Methodology

The empirical questions required a qualitative research design because qualitative methods are rich in detail and embedded with data specific to the study (Maxwell, 2005). This
study focused on one specific alternative school, and the information collected was specific to the participants who attended that school. Primary data was collected through qualitative research methods, and primary sources included student interviews, teacher interviews, parent interviews, and a student focus group. The research questions were designed to illuminate participants’ perceptions and experiences. Qualitative research methods produce findings from real-world settings where the “phenomenon of interest unfold naturally” (Patton, 2001, p. 39). This strategy is appropriate for an evaluation study, which as Mertens (2005) explains, “is designed to provide an in-depth description of a specific program, practice, or setting” (p. 229). Qualitative research methods also allowed for the specific particularities of students to be considered in the analysis. Students who attend Urban High have specific criteria to enter the program and have multiple risk factors that influence their behaviors. Furthermore, qualitative methods helped capture the complex context of the program that serves a challenging population by “emphasizing the importance of understanding the meanings of human behavior in its social-cultural context” (Patton, 1987, p. 20).

According to Creswell (2009), qualitative methods are also helpful in studies that apply critical theory and program theory because these methods allow for an “inter-subjective” understanding, as well as an opportunity to contribute an understanding of complex issues experienced by the study’s participants. Critical theory is a qualitative theoretical perspective because it focuses on empowering human beings who are overcoming obstacles (Fay, 1987). The study required that the participants share their experiences as they see them, which is the intention of qualitative research. Using this method, participants were encouraged to tell their individual stories and experiences in the program. This study utilized program theory and critical theory to frame the discussion of whether or not program policies and interventions supported
educational equality. It also reflected on whether the program provided students with what they needed to overcome obstacles. Both theories helped to organize the data collection and analysis processes.

**Process evaluation.** The evaluation study was interested in documenting and assessing the “process, implementation, and development” of Urban High School (Mertens, 2005). Since the program was implemented, there were several noted student successes, such as improved attendance, grades, and behaviors, but it was not clear how, why, and in what context these successes were achieved. As stated by Patton (1987), “Process evaluations are aimed at elucidating and understanding the internal dynamics of program operations” (p. 23). A process evaluation allowed for an examination of Urban High’s interventions, polices, and practices and identified specific areas that require attention. An advantage of conducting a process evaluation is that there are opportunities to “find the unexpected” (Weiss, 1998). As highlighted by Weiss (1998), Process evaluations “examine what goes on inside a program while it is in progress, with a focus on participant enrollment, activities offered, actions taken, staff practices, and client actions” (p. 32). Process evaluations are conducted during the early stages of program implementations when there is strong interest in improving the program (Weiss, 1998). At the time of the data collection, Urban High School was in its fourth year of implementation and would benefit from an early evaluation to strengthen its operation.

Clear Water Public School District services an urban community with a dropout rate of 8.3% (MA DESE, 2010), and only 10.7% of adults in Clear Water have college degrees (Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2002). The students who attend Urban High not only have dropout statistics to overcome, but also have many risk factors to overcome. They have not been successful in the traditional educational settings within the district. Consequently,
there were specific programs put in place with goals of addressing some of these risk factors. As stated by Weiss (1998), this research project “relied on detailed knowledge of the processes by which the program took shape and how these processes affected participants” (p. 83). Additionally, the evaluation highlighted and prioritized individual student experiences.

This process evaluation explored and documented the outstanding challenges and obstacles that exist at Urban High. The evaluation hopes to contribute to the continuation of the program, strengthening areas that need adjustment (Patton, 1987). It can help with decisions going forward by providing important and relevant information to help inform administration on what is working and what needs still exist within the program. As supported by Mertens (2005), an evaluation is associated with the “need for information for decision making in a specific setting” (p. 2).

Clear Water Public School District has a high dropout rate. Many students in the program share the same dropout risk factors as students in other settings within the district. Many of the students who attend Urban High have entered the program for a specific incident. A process evaluation at Urban High can aid in identifying what strategies, interventions, and environments are conducive to addressing dropout. It may also support replication of current effective practices in the district if the “program is considered to be a model worthy of replication at other sites” (Patton, 1987, p. 24).

Site

The evaluation study was conducted at Clear Water Public School District’s alternative school, Urban High School. The school is located on the third floor of the Clear Water Public School District’s Administration Building. At one time, several decades ago, the entire building was the setting for the district’s high school. The third floor of the building was also the site of a
charter school until it moved out two years prior to the alternative school’s arrival. The school was created in 2008 to service students, grades six through twelve, who had been excluded from their neighborhood school under MGL (Massachusetts General Laws) chapter 70, 37h or 37h1/2. These students have been found to compromise the safety of other students by either: 1.) Possessing a dangerous weapon on school grounds; 2.) Assaulting a teacher/staff member or a serious assault on another student; or 3) Pending felony of a serious nature or have been convicted of a felony charge that they received within the community.

At the beginning of the study, the school was servicing approximately 65 students. Student enrollment changes weekly due to open enrollment and students’ displacements in living situations. Many students are in foster care, in temporary living arrangements under the custody of Department of Children and Families (DCF), or are in and out of “lock up” under the Department of Youth Services (DYS). Some of the students are recovered dropouts who have long histories of poor attendance, retention, or high suspension rates. At the beginning of the study, 38% of the students had an Individual Educational Plan, which included a disability of either specific learning, health, or intellectual. Ninety-five percent of the students qualified for free and reduced lunch. Urban High has a diverse population, with the majority of students having minority status of either African American (32%) or Hispanic (54%). Students also presented with many risk factors such as one-parent homes, court involvement, low socio-economic status, and gang involvement. Many of the students have histories of poor attendance, high levels of suspensions, gaps in learning, and grade retention.

At the beginning of the study, school staff included one principal, one school clerk, and eight teachers, including four middle school teachers and four high school teachers. One of the middle school teachers was also the special education teacher for the entire school. There were
three paraprofessionals, one part-time school nurse, one behavioral specialist, a part-time attendance officer, a part-time school resource officer, one school adjustment counselor, and one part-time counselor working under a grant. The school also utilized community agencies to provide counseling services. Personnel from these agencies came into the school on a part-time basis to provide individual and group counseling.

**Participants**

Participants of this study consisted of students, parents, and staff. Every student, parent, and staff member at the program was asked to participate in the study since higher participation would allow for a comprehensive and personal view of the program. All participants were asked about their feelings, thoughts, and perceptions about their school. Students provided three sets of data, including a student connection survey, six individual interviews, and a focus group. Staff provided two sets of data, which included staff questionnaires and three individual interviews. Finally, parents provided three individual interviews. Participants in this study provided rich valuable data.

**Students.** This research study utilized purposeful sampling in order to obtain “information-rich cases” (Patton, 1987, p. 52). According to Maxwell (2005), “Selecting individuals that can provide you with the information that you need in order to answer your research questions is the most important consideration in qualitative decisions,” which is used in purposeful sampling (p. 88). In order to obtain in-depth information, I selected students who were at the program for at least six months and had experienced some kind of success at the program. Including successful students provided insight about which interventions and external factors contributed to individual success. The study included a focus group of five students, and six individual student face-to-face interviews. In order to “adequately represent the entire range
or variation,” the six students included at least one of the following: one special education student (currently 38% of population), one female (currently 18% of population), one male (currently 82% of population), one middle school student (currently 39% of the population), one high school student (currently 61% of the population), and one recovered dropout (out of 3 students). The goal was to “maximize variability” to discover how students with diverse needs experienced Urban High School (Maxwell, 2005). Students who fit the criteria volunteered to participate in the study.

**Focus group student profiles.** Students in the focus group attended the program between 6 months to 3 years. It was helpful that 4 out of the 5 focus group participants were at least 18 and were able to sign their own consent forms. Students in the focus group had all been excluded from their previous schools under state law. They were deemed “to be a danger to the wellbeing of other students” according to chapter 20, 37H Massachusetts General Laws. The interview was in an office at the school. Prior to the interview, the description and consent forms were reviewed with students. All students were asked if they had any questions and were all informed that they could stop or leave at any time. Students in the focus group are represented in the following table.
Table 1

*Focus Group Profiles*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age/Grade</th>
<th>How Entered</th>
<th>How Long at WC</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student A</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18/Senior</td>
<td>Weapon/Drugs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student B</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18/Senior</td>
<td>Weapon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student C</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>16/Sophomore</td>
<td>A/B Dangerous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>(Felony Charge)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student D</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>18/Senior</td>
<td>Coming from Lock-up Drugs/Assault</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student E</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>17/Senior</td>
<td>Assault Teacher</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Student A.* Student A was a Hispanic 18 year-old male who was currently a senior at the time of the interview. He had been excluded from two different schools in the district—once for possession of a knife, and another time for possession of drugs. Student A had been living in the same foster home for the past five years. His father was murdered when he was young. He was a self-proclaimed gang member and had tattoos over his arms and hands. Over his stay at Urban High, Student A had been suspended for drug use and was sent to inpatient drug rehab for two weeks before being able to return to school. He had told staff on many occasions that he believed
he was going to die before the age of 25 like his father had. However, Student A had a strong
desire to graduate. He attended school and complied with most of the rules.

**Student B.** Student B was an 18 year-old white male who was a senior at the time of the
interview. He had been excluded from the mainstream high school for having a BB gun and a
knife. Student B lived at home with his two parents. He had been very successful at Urban High
over the past year, having minimal issues with his behavior. Student B had a 504 plan for ADD
and required some accommodations for his assignments.

**Student C.** Student C was a 16 year-old Hispanic male senior who had attended Urban
High for the last three years. He was excluded from his previous school for having a felony
charge (assault and battery with a dangerous weapon). His father also was involved in a gang and
murdered. Student C continued to be gang involved and had tattoos over his body. Student C was
identified to return to his mainstream school the previous year. However, his mother advocated
to have him remain at Urban High stating that she was worried for his safety because of his gang
affiliation.

**Student D.** Student D was an 18 year-old African American male who was a senior at the
time of the interview. He had come from Department of Youth Services “lock up” in Worcester
almost three years earlier. He had been in “lock up” for assaulting his principal and drugs.
Student D lived alone in an apartment in a multi-family house shared by his grandparents. His
mother spent most of her time in New Jersey where she works. Student D currently is an illegal
immigrant from Jamaica. Staff and teachers in the school have provided Student D on many
occasions with groceries, meals, and clothing. There has been a lot of effort from the school to
currently get Student D proper paperwork in order to transition him into workforce. Student D has
struggled with drug use and attendance over his years at Urban High.
**Student E.** Student E is a 17 year-old Hispanic female who was a senior at the time of the interview. She had been excluded from the mainstream high school for assaulting a staff member. Student E had made good progress since attending Urban High. She lived with her mother and two sisters. She is very independent and well known for her expressive side. Her moods fluctuate from friendly to at times unapproachable.

**Individual student interview profiles.** The study also included six individual student face-to-face interviews. In order to “adequately represent the entire range or variation,” the six students included one of the following: one special education student (at the time of the interview 38% of population), two females (18% of population), five males (82% of population), and one recovered dropout who had previously graduated from Urban High. Students and their parents were asked to sign an informed consent form before participating in the interview. Designed open-ended, simple questions solicited their experiences, perceptions, and feelings about the education and about the program (Weiss, 1998). Questions also solicited information about students’ behavior, grades, attendance, and overall academic experience before and after attending the program. The interviews consisted of questions arranged for the purpose of “taking each respondent through the same sequence and asking each respondent the same questions with essentially the same words” (Patton, 1987, p. 112). However, if needed, clarification and encouragement were given to students.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Age/Grade</th>
<th>How Entered</th>
<th>How Long</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Vincent</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>20/Graduated</td>
<td>Dropout/From West Side</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Richard</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15/sophomore</td>
<td>Recruited (poor attendance, failing, conduct cards)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>David</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15/sophomore</td>
<td>Charges/IEP Emotional</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sandi</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>16/junior</td>
<td>Peer Issues/Safety</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Calli</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18/Senior</td>
<td>Fighting/From FR Alternative</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Phil</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>15/Sophomore</td>
<td>2x weapons</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Vincent.** Vincent was a 20 year-old male who had attended Urban High in 2008. He had attended East Side (the old alternative school) prior to that and was planning to drop out of school the summer before Urban High had opened. While in East Side, Vincent had been sent back to his middle school only to be excluded again returning to East Side. He attended Urban High for three years (2008-2011) until he graduated. Vincent recently began working at Urban
High as a mentor. During the previous year, he had signed up for the army, completed boot camp, and was waiting for his first deployment. He had recently fathered a child and appears to be a great dad, working hard, and having a lot to offer the students who are at Urban High.

David. David is a 15-year-old white male who is currently a sophomore at Urban High. He was expelled from an alternative school in another city in Massachusetts. During his time at Urban High, David lived in a group home for a year but had recently moved back with his mother and brother. David was in Department of Children and Families (DCF) custody and has a long history of DCF involvement due to his mother losing parental rights. David’s father had recently died and was a registered sex offender. David had experienced success and had matured over the years at Urban High. David did use substances openly and would often acknowledge and verbalize his poor examples in life. He would also verbalize his desire to overcome and “break the cycle.”

Sandi. Sandi was a white, 16-year-old junior (11th grade) female who had not been excluded from the mainstream high school but was having difficulty with her peers and was sent to Urban High to avoid any further issues. Sandi had attended the program for one year, left the program, then returned to the program because she was having difficulty again. She lived with her mother who was divorced from her father. She did not qualify for free or reduced lunch. Sandi did not have any major behavioral issues; however, she did struggle with her relationships with other female students similar to some of the problems she had at her previous settings. However, she and her mother strongly advocated for her to attend Urban High.

Phil. Phil is a 15-year-old white sophomore (10th) male who was excluded twice from the mainstream high school—the first time for making a bomb threat, and the second time for having a dangerous weapon. Phil was not a typical “street kid” at Urban High. He lived with both his
parents and did not have a history of gang involvement or poverty as most of the students at Urban High had. Phil did not have any behavioral issues at Urban High. He was a quiet student. He was also chosen because he had come to Urban High went back after his year was completed, and then returned shortly thereafter for another incident.

Richard. Richard was 15 year-old Hispanic male who was a sophomore (10th grade). He had not been excluded from his high school. He was one of the students who had been recruited over the summer to come to Urban High because of his poor attendance, multiple conduct cards, and failing grades at the mainstream high school. Richard appeared to be well-spoken, candid with his responses, and mature for his age of fifteen. He is well liked by the staff and appeared to be doing well since he had been attending Urban High.

Calli. Calli is an 18 year-old Hispanic female who is a senior. A few months earlier, Calli had moved to Clear Water after being excluded for fighting from the alternative school in a different city. Calli lived with her mother and two sisters. She was very personable and sweet during the interview. Staff reports that Calli is a quiet, pleasant student who does have some issues with attending school on a consistent basis. Calli who came from another alternative school was able to provide a point of comparison as well as describing her experiences at Urban High.

Staff. All staff were asked to participate in a questionnaire. In addition to the questionnaire, three staff members, consisting of two teachers and one counselor were invited to participate in an individual interview. Staff members signed an informed consent before participating in the interview. This selection was also purposeful to allow for a “maximum variation” (Maxwell, 2005). All staff who participated had at least three years of experience at the program. I also asked the full-time counselor to participate in the study to provide clinical
perceptions and experiences to help answer questions about the intake procedures and different programs and interventions used at Urban High. Teacher/counselor interviews solicited their experiences, perceptions, and feelings about the program. Interviews included open-ended questions, which solicited information about their professional experience at Urban High. Questions also asked them to compare their experiences to previous professional experience in other educational settings. They also included their perceptions about the implementation of the program, the impact on the students they serve, as well as specific questions on what obstacles exist in the program. Even though questions were standardized and open-ended, time was given to help with encouragement to obtain honest responses. As the teachers’ or counselor’s previous supervisor, time was spent reassuring them that any information provided would not be held against them. It was conveyed to staff participants, that in fact, negative experiences as well as obstacles were important to the findings.

Table 3

Teacher Interview Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Sex</th>
<th>Position</th>
<th>Years at WC</th>
<th>Years experience</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alexander</td>
<td>Male/Bi-racial</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Veronica</td>
<td>Female/White</td>
<td>Counselor</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Walter</td>
<td>Male/African American</td>
<td>Teacher</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Veronica. Veronica had worked at the program since its fruition in September 2008. Initially she worked only three days a week as the school adjustment counselor but as the program grew, she became full time at the school. Besides having a master’s degree in
counseling, she is a licensed mental health counselor (LMHC) and has over 15 years of experience working with at-risk students. She was candid and very forthcoming during the interview. The interview happened in her office during the day, and there were several interruptions during the interview due to students needing her assistance. Veronica took a very practical approach in her dealings with students. She understood the evolution of their behaviors and focused a lot on the underlying issues. She also believed that whatever incident had led the students to Urban High, there were definite flags that were not acknowledged prior to the incident.

*Alexander.* Alexander was a high school teacher at Urban High who had been in residence since the establishment of the school. Alexander has a master’s degree and was currently taking some leadership courses. He is in his late twenties and had some teaching experience working in other school settings. Alexander grew up in Clear Water. He was also very forthcoming, easy to talk to, and candid in his responses. We met in his classroom during his planning period during the school day.

*Walter.* Walter is a high school teacher who started at Urban High as a substitute teacher. He was working on finishing his master’s degree. He had been at the school for 3 years. For the last 3 years, he taught Social Studies at the school. Walter was also very easy to talk with and provided candid answers. Walter previously taught at the mainstream high school where many of the students who came to Urban High originally attended school.

*Parents.* Parents who chose to be involved in the study provided valuable for identifying potential suggestions for strengthening, adjusting, or replicating practices. It was important to this study to solicit parents’ feelings, experiences, opinions, and thoughts about Urban High. Three parents volunteered to participate in individual interviews. Obtaining parental participation
was challenging in this study. A description of the study in a form of a letter was sent home to ask parents or guardians to participate in the study. The letter requested parents to notify the evaluator if they were interested in participating in the study. Any parent who was interested would have been interviewed. Initially, there were no responses to the letters. Therefore, there were phone calls made to parents describing the study and requesting participation. Once I called them, I was able to get a commitment from three parents to meet and participate in the interview. I originally had four parents I was going to interview; however, one of the parents lost her sister to suicide and subsequently was not able to meet. Specific questions were asked about their child’s experiences and if they had noticed any changes in their child’s grades, attendance, behavior, and overall academic success. Belief and opinion questions were also asked to help explore what the parents thought about Urban High. Just like other participants in the study, time was given to help parents feel comfortable about providing negative feedback as well about the program.

Table 4

Parent Profiles

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Ethnicity</th>
<th>Sex of Child</th>
<th>Grade</th>
<th>How long at school</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Kendra</td>
<td>Cape Verdean</td>
<td>Female</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rosa</td>
<td>Hispanic</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>9th</td>
<td>1 year</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Barbara</td>
<td>White</td>
<td>Male</td>
<td>12th</td>
<td>2 years</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Kendra.* Kendra was a Cape Verdean mother of a female student at Urban High. She was a single mother, in approximately her late thirties, who had three daughters. I met with Kendra in
her apartment in Clear Water. We sat in the living room. All of her daughters were home but were in a bedroom except for the occasional movements when the youngest would come in the room. Kendra was pleasant and very willing to answer all my questions. I was meeting with her at her home because Kendra worked until late afternoon and it was easier to meet with her at her home. She was going to be taking her youngest daughter to dance class once the interview was over. Kendra’s daughter had been excluded from the mainstream school for fighting and had been attending Urban High for about 3 years.

**Rosa.** Rosa was a Hispanic mother of a male student at Urban High. She was a single mother with two boys. She was approximately in her forties. Her son at Urban High was the youngest. I met with Rosa at Urban High in an office. She was very warm, pleasant, and candid. She answered all of my questions. She did struggle with the English language. I asked her to let me know if she did not understand the question. She was able to communicate but at times needed me to repeat the question. Rosa’s son was sent to Urban High after being excluded from one of the middle schools for drugs.

**Barbara.** Barbara was a white mother of a male student at Urban High. She lived with her husband and her son who attended the school. At the beginning of the interview, she only answered my questions with quick responses but as the interview went on, she began to open up and expressed a lot of anger towards the school where her son had previously attended. I met with her at Urban High in the art room. Barbara looked like she was in her early thirties. Her son had been excluded from the mainstream high school for bringing in a BB gun.

**Stages of Data Collection**

Data collection occurred in stages. The first stage included the Student Connection Survey, teacher questionnaire, and program data. Program data included student records;
interventions used in the program; school activities; physical environment, including resources; and school handbook, including the program’s mission, vision, and belief statements. Stage two included a student focus group. Stage three included student, teacher/counselor, and parent interviews.

*Figure 2: Evaluating an alternative pathway: program evaluation data collection stages.*

**Types of Data**

The research questions presented in this study required qualitative data collection methods. According to Weiss (1998), the data in this study are the “most common sources of data” used in qualitative evaluation studies (p. 152). The primary sources of data came from face-to-face interviews with students, parents, program staff, as well as a student focus group. In addition, data included a student connection survey, a staff questionnaire, and program records to include existing student records.
Table 5

*Participant Data Collected*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Students</th>
<th>Teachers/Staff</th>
<th>Parents</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Interviews</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Focus Group</td>
<td>5</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Survey</td>
<td>15</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Questionnaire</td>
<td></td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Focus group.** A focus group was established based on criteria discussed in the previous section. The focus group had five students who “helped to gain additional insight from the interaction of ideas among the participants” (Mertens, 2005, p. 386). This strategy was implemented to elicit more of the participants’ points of view in order to gather more accurate information (Mertens, 2005). As supported by Patton (1987), participants tend to “provide checks and balances on each other, which will weed out false or extreme views” (p. 135). As each group member listens to the personal experiences of others, he/she will think more deeply about the issue being discussed and contribute to that discussion. The focus group interview was also recorded and transcribed.

**Interviews.** According to Patton (1987), process evaluations require “detailed description of program operations based on interviews with staff, and clients” (p. 23). Interviews were helpful and appropriate for this type of study because comprehensive information was being gathered from the students, teachers, and parents who participated. The interviews allowed for a view into the participants’ worlds and helped further understand their perspectives (Patton, 1987). The study explored perceptions and solicited both positive and negative responses. All
interviews were approximately 1 hour. Interviews were conversational, and ample time was given for response to open-ended questions (Kvale, 2007). All interviews were recorded and transcribed for coding to occur.

**Student connection survey.** Students who returned their consent forms were administered the School Connection Survey. The survey was created in 2004 by the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and Chicago Public Schools after collecting data from many focus groups of parents, students, and teachers, in addition to national experts (American Institutes for Research, 2008). The survey constructs measured how students felt about: (1) safety (2) academic rigor (3) academic support and (4) emotional support (American Institute Research, 2008). Collecting information on rigor, safety, and student support is important data to consider when using Critical Theory and Program Theory.

The survey consists of between 9 and 13 questions in each construct totaling 48 questions. Each question solicited one answer from a four-point Likert scale. Questions under the constructs of Student Support, Social and Emotional Learning, and High Expectations request an answer of (1) Strongly Disagree, (2) Disagree, (3) Agree, or (4) Strongly Agree. Questions under the Safe and Respectful Climate construct request an answer of (1) Not Safe, (2) Somewhat Safe, (3) Mostly Safe, or (4) Very Safe. The survey provided the study with a number of student responses in how they felt in each scale. It also provided an overall number on how the school measures up in each scale. The data was reported by tallying and providing the outcomes of student responses. Questions were then coded to correspond with the research questions of the study.

**Staff questionnaires.** All staff were asked to complete a questionnaire that included “open-ended questions that will allow the respondents to reply in his own words” (Weiss, 1998,
This data helped answer questions about the perceptions of staff (Patton, 1987). Questions were asked about their experiences, both positive and negative. Information and suggestions for program improvement were also solicited. Even though participants were reassured that information would not be held against them in anyway, questionnaires were anonymous to help allow participants to be candid.

Program records. Program records, as discussed by Weiss (1998), were also considered in this study and “remain a vital source of information” (p. 158) Program school records included curriculum, student handbook, program activities, interventions, and observations, which included human interactions as well as physical environment. Exploring different sources of data, which included curriculum and resources, helped answer research questions of educational equality. Examining interventions and program activities answered research questions that focused on student needs and effective practices. Exiting historical data including grades, attendance, and discipline was also collected on all students from the student cumulative files and in addition to the district’s data system IPASS.

Protection of Human Subjects

Participants who took part in this study were fully informed of the purpose of the study, as well as the expectations of their participation. Prior to any participation in the survey, questionnaires, interviews, and a focus group, the research project was described both in writing and in person. All study participants were asked to read and sign a consent statement for each data collection activity that they participated in. All individuals who were asked to participate were given opportunities to ask questions and were able to decline participation with no consequences for them. If it was determined that any participant required a translated consent
form in Spanish or Portuguese, the forms would have been developed. A translator would have been provided for any participants who required translation.

Consideration was given to the fact that I had been the previous principal of the program. Teachers and students who participated in interviews or the focus group were assured that they could answer interview questions honestly, without concern about retribution. They were also informed that they may decline to answer any questions if they did not feel comfortable answering. The informed consent also informed parents and students that if any student disclosed experiencing bullying or any issues of abuse in school, I, being an administrator, would be required to investigate the incident. Any information obtained during data collection was only used for program evaluation purposes and documented in the recommendation section of study unless it was determined to be something that needed immediate attention to promote the wellbeing of any particular student.

Confidentiality. Although there was no foreseeable risk to participants, the researcher arranged to “respect the privacy and confidentiality” of the individuals in this research study (Mertens, 2005, p. 337). Participants in this study will remain confidential, and the district, site, and participants are identified by pseudonyms. Resulting reports or publications will not include identifiable information. Audio tapes and transcripts from interviews and focus groups were kept in the researcher’s locked cabinet at home and will be destroyed within 3 months of this study’s completion. Digital records of the transcriptions were kept on the researcher’s computer hard drive. Paper and digital records of the data will be destroyed within 3 months of the study’s completion. Only authorized people at Northeastern University may request to see research information about individuals in this study and only to ensure that the research has been conducted properly.
Data Analysis

Qualitative data was collected and analyzed according to professionally acceptable standards of practice. As stated by Creswell (2009), “Data analysis is generally an ongoing process involving continual reflection about the data and asking analytical questions” (p. 184). The data in this study’s analysis began once data started being collected. As discussed by Weiss, (1997), the analysis focused on “converting a mass of raw data into a coherent account by sorting, arranging and categorizing, and processing them to make sense of their configuration” (p. 271).

The main categorizing strategy that was used in this study was coding (Maxwell, 2005). As Creswell (2009) states, coding is “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). In this study, as discussed by Strauss (1987), the goal of coding was to “fracture the data and rearrange them into categories that facilitated comparison between things in the same category and that aided in the development of theoretical concepts” (p. 29). Comparisons that were made in this study reflected negative views and positive views. Program theory also provided a structure for analysis of evaluation data. Data was categorized based on program goals and program implementation, keeping change mechanisms in mind.

The interviews and focus group provided open-ended inquiries about participants’ perceptions and experiences at Urban High School. Interviews were recorded, and notes of key phrases and quotes were taken during interviews (Patton, 1987). Listening to interview tapes prior to transcription was also an opportunity for analysis. Interview and focus groups were analyzed along with other data collected by utilizing Creswell’s (2009) five stages of multiple level of analysis (pp. 85-186).
Figure 3: Stages of analysis.

Stages of document analysis.

Stage 1- Organize and prepare data. The first stage of data analysis consisted of organizing and preparing the data for analysis (Creswell, 2009, p. 185). This included listening to and transcribing interviews and focus group discussions. It also included scanning and reviewing observations, interviews, and focus group notes. During this stage, data was arranged under specific types and sources (Creswell, 2009).

Stage 2- Reflection. During this stage, I read through and reflected on the data collected. As Creswell (2009) recommends, I reflected on “tone, understanding what participants were trying to convey, and obtaining a general impression of overall depth, creditability, and use of information” (p.185). During this stage, a log was used to document notes and subjective impressions.
**Stage 3- Open coding.** During this stage, as stated by Weiss (1998), “program theory helped structure the logical analysis of evaluation of data” (p. 288). It was during this stage that coding began. As defined by Rossman & Rallis (1998), coding is “the process of organizing the material into chunks or segments of text before bringing meaning to information” (p. 171). A code book was developed at this stage, with prearranged codes that continued to be broken down, examined, and categorized (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). In this stage, coding was broad and allowed for the free flow of ideas.

**Stage 4- Emic analysis.** In this stage, the categories became narrow and were taken from my empirical questions in the study, which focused on program theory and implementation concepts. Emic analysis was utilized for interviews, the focus group, and observation data to document program operation and program implementation. As Lett (1990) explains, “Emic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the native members of the culture whose beliefs and behaviors are being studied” (p. 130). In taking an emic approach, I tried to put aside prior theories and assumptions I may have had in order to let themes, patterns, and concepts emerge from data collected from participants.

**Stage 5- Thematic/selective coding.** In this stage, data was consolidated, and themes became narrower, preparing the data for interpretation. An etic approach was used to consolidate themes that had to do with the lens of critical and program theoretical frameworks. As Lett (1990) describes it, “Etic constructs are accounts, descriptions, and analyses expressed in terms of the conceptual schemes and categories regarded as meaningful and appropriate by the community of scientific observers” (p. 130). Data obtained from participants and other sources, such as program data and student records, were compared to information collected during the
literature review. Empirical questions of program impact on educational equity and program implementation questions were also considered.

**Validity.** Unlike quantitative studies, validity and creditability are not viewed separately in qualitative studies such as the study discussed here. As Patton (2001) states, “the credibility of a qualitative research depends on the ability and effort of the researcher because the researcher is the instrument” (p. 14). As the researcher, I ensured that the data collected and conclusions established had integrity and had been collected and analyzed according to professionally acceptable standards of practice (Mertens, 2005). In qualitative studies, such as this one, Maxwell (1992) states, “validity also referred primarily to accounts, not to data or methods and is relative to purpose and circumstances” (p. 282). As recommended in qualitative studies, requirements such as credibility, rigor, transferability, and trustworthiness were used to establish the standard for quality (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

**Credibility.** With regard to interviews, “member checks” were completed to establish creditability (Mertens, 2005). At the end of the interview, I summarized what had been said and asked participants if the notes accurately reflected his or her position. Guba and Lincoln (1989) regarded member checks as “the single most critical technique for establishing credibility” (p. 239). Qualitative researchers also establish reliability and validity through triangulation (Maxwell, 2005). In this study, triangulation occurred through both methods and sources. In this study, sources and methods that came from student surveys, student interviews, staff questionnaire, staff interviews, parent interviews, and student records were used to discover converging themes. Triangulation of data helped support consistency of evidence across different sources of data (Fielding & Fielding, 1986).
Threats to Validity. To improve the credibility of this study, procedures helped rule out validity threats. The subjectivity or “bias” of this researcher was considered during the study. There are two threats to validity that can surface during qualitative studies: first, the conclusions that fit the researcher’s exiting theory and second, the data that becomes relevant to the researcher (Miles & Huberman, 1994). I was the previous principal of the alternative school, which could have influenced the outcome of conclusions. Due to the subjective nature of qualitative research, it was important for me to continually engage in self-examination to be certain that my own biases and stereotypes were not influencing the interpretation of the findings. To help test the validity of conclusions, strategies such as triangulation and a reflection journal were used (Campbell, 1988). During the data collection, I kept a reflection journal to acknowledge and document interpretations of data. Reflection helped me be conscious of any thoughts or bias during the process of data collection throughout the study. This study also solicited data on ways to improve the program. Negative experiences were important to me to help understand specific issues that needed additional attention within the program. Once member checks were used, interviews were recorded and transcribed to ensure data was accurate and consistent (Maxwell, 2005).

Transferability. Generalizability supports external validity in quantitative research designs (Mertens, 2005). However, in most qualitative research designs, transferability helps support external validity. In this study, the findings were specific to those participants and their experiences at Urban High, and so transferability was applied to the questions that the study answered. Thick description also involves “an emic perspective”; providing a “thick description” helps readers make their own decision about conclusions (Davis, 1995). In order to ensure the greatest amount of transferability possible, I provided sufficient detail, descriptions, and
information in order for the results of the study to be applied to a new context. The data was specific to the program but the information that was obtained could be applied to at-risk students and alternative programs in different contexts.

**Conformability.** According to Shenton (2004), conformability in qualitative research seeks to ensure that the “results or findings are the result of the experience and ideas of the informants, rather than the characteristics and preferences of the researcher” (p. 72). This is something that was important to this researcher as well. Reflection and triangulation aided in conformability in this study. As I mentioned earlier, I kept a journal for reflection during collection of data that recorded beliefs, thoughts, and feelings for later review. This helped to reflect and influence decisions throughout the study. Triangulation of data also supported conformability in this study. Triangulation is typically a test for improving the validity and reliability and evaluation of findings (Patton, 2001). Engaging multiple methods, such as observation, interviews, and recordings led to a more valid, reliable, and diverse construction of realities.

**Trustworthiness.** In qualitative studies, the idea of discovering truth through measures of reliability and validity is replaced by the idea of trustworthiness (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). To establish “trustworthiness,” I asked continuous questions about my interpretation of the data collected in interviews and focus groups, as well as the other sources. Qualitative research data are interpreted and are not “value-free” descriptions (Denzin, 2000). As a researcher interested in the topic of dropout prevention, as well as being personally and professionally vested in the participants of this study, interpretations were focused on answering the research questions. However, my 20 years of professional experience working with the population of this study...
provided me with insight that was applied with the intention of learning more. Thus, initially my biases in this study were that:

- Students who attend Urban High School do have some positive experiences.
- Urban High needs a clearer mission and vision that is supported by resources as well as stakeholders.
- Professional Development is needed to help support staff members who are working with students who require additional support to address their unique needs.
- Resources to support educational equity are needed.
- Students at Urban High deserve high expectations, a concept that is sometimes in competition with meeting students where they are.
- Students at Urban High come with many complex issues that cannot be minimized or solved by the school.
- There may be a need for additional alternatives for those students who do not respond to current interventions, or who impede the progress of other students in the school.

**Summary**

This qualitative study undertook the problem of dropout. The systemic, formative program evaluation sought to evaluate a current dropout prevention strategy implemented by the Clear Water Public School District—a program that is attempting to meet the specific needs of the students who attend the program. It was determined that the new alternative school Urban High, established in 2008, would benefit from a process evaluation that identified and documented its strengths, as well as areas of weakness that require improvement. This study
described how strategies and interventions are used, and more importantly analyzed how they are impacting students’ lives.

Critical Theory and Program Theory frameworks guided the literature review and inquiry of the research questions in this study. These theories rely on qualitative methods because this type of data provides an in-depth view of how participants are feeling and thinking. Through interviews, a focus group, student surveys, and other program data, the study attempted to collect information that would answer the study’s research questions. Data focused on the implementation of the program, the impact and experiences of students in the program, the comparison of interventions on effective practices in the literature, and educational equity.

The methodology chosen for this study aligned with what was needed for a program evaluation. There are a wide range of alternative settings within the United States. Evaluations of these specific types are unique to each setting. The evaluation was also conducted at the early stages of the implementation of the program. A process evaluation allowed for this type of inquiry. Study participants were treated appropriately with consideration to confidentiality, transparency, and compassion. The evaluation analyzed data collected from multiple sources, using appropriate protocol to ensure trustworthiness. Emic and Etic perspectives were used to thoroughly analyze data.

One of the goals of this study was to take what was learned and apply it to improving the program for students and addressing any additional supports that may be needed to improve the program. Another goal was to inform the Clear Water District of strategies that have proven to be successful for at-risk students in the district. The study will prove to be successful if it can enrich the district, the program, and most importantly, the students it serves.
Chapter Four

Report of Research Results

Introduction

This evaluation study was conducted at the Clear Water Public School’s alternative school, Urban High School. Qualitative research methods were used to collect data to explore and allow for an in-depth inquiry of personal experiences from students, parents, and teachers. The study allowed participants to explain their thoughts, feelings, perceptions, and experiences of the program. Other sources of data included program documents and students’ statistical and demographic data. The study’s outcomes identified strengths and weaknesses of the program. More importantly, it identified specific aspects of the program that helped students become successful who had previous histories of failing grades, poor attendance, negative behaviors, and who were on the path to dropout. The four questions of this study were: 1) How do students experience Urban High School? 2) How has the new alternative program implemented in the Clear Water Public School District impacted students’ grades, attendance, behavior, and overall school performance? 3) How does the design and implementation of Urban High School compare to the criteria of effective practices established through a review of the literature? 4) How do the practices used at Urban High School address educational equality and equity?

Types of Data

Data presented in this chapter consist of program data from Urban High’s school forms, student handbook, IPASS, the school district’s computer software, as well as from research participants. Participants included students, parents, and program staff. Student Data consists of a Student Connection Survey, one Focus Group, and six individual interviews. Teacher/Staff data
consists of three individual interviews and teacher/staff questionnaires. Finally, parent data consists of three individual interviews. All interviews in this research study utilized purposeful sampling in order to obtain “information-rich cases” (Patton, 1987, p. 52). As stated by Maxwell (2005), “Selecting individuals that can provide you with the information that you need in order to answer your research questions is the most important consideration in qualitative decisions,” which is carried out through purposeful sampling (p. 88). The richest and most valuable data from this research project came from the participants who were interviewed.

Students who returned their consent forms were administered the School Connection Survey (American Institute Research, 2004). Several attempts were made to get consent forms from the 60 students who attended the program at the time. Only 16 consent forms were returned. The survey elicited information on a 4-point Likert scale from students about the following: perceptions and feelings; sense of safety; beliefs about high standards; and needs for emotional supports. The survey provided data about a number of student responses regarding how they felt about each aspect of their school experiences. It also provided an overall number for how the sample as a whole experiences the school with regard to each category. The data was reported by tallying and providing the outcomes of student responses. Questions were then coded to correspond with the research questions of the study.

During the focus group, as well as student, parent, and staff interviews, participants were asked open-ended questions about their experiences, feelings, thoughts, and perceptions about the program. They were also asked about the positive and negative aspects of the program. The questions allowed for rich dialogue. In addition to staff interviews, data was collected from anonymous questionnaires that were provided to staff during June 2011. The questionnaires included open-ended questions that solicited additional data to answer the study’s research
questions. Seven out of fifteen questionnaires were returned. Three of the questionnaires were returned uncompleted because they belonged to the three staff interviewed, and I did not want to duplicate data due to similar responses.

**Program Demographic Data**

**Clear Water public schools.** The Clear Water Public Schools are in an urban school district with a current dropout rate of 8.1%. In 2011, 56.4% of students graduated in 4 years (Massachusetts, DESE, 2012). According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2012), as of March 2012, Massachusetts has an unemployment rate of 6.5%, while Clear Water’s unemployment rate is at 10%. Along with these alarming statistics, only 10.7% of Clear Water’s adults have earned a college degree (Massachusetts Department of Public Health, 2002). Clear Water Public School District currently serves 12,500 students. The district includes 19 elementary schools, 3 middle schools, 1 high school, 1 day school for students on Individual Educational Plans that require a more restrictive environment, and 1 alternative school (Urban High School). Clear Water Public School Department has gone through many changes over the last 5 years, having three different superintendents. Currently, the district has been under state scrutiny for having two schools with the identified status of “level 4,” which is considered to be “underperforming.” Over the past year, the district has developed an Accelerated Improvement Plan (AIP) that was required by the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE).

**Urban High School.** The study was conducted at Clear Water’s alternative school. The school is located on the third floor of the Clear Water Public School’s administration building. Several decades ago, the entire building was the site for the district’s comprehensive high school. In the most recent decade, the charter school for the city used the space until it moved out, prior
to the alternative school’s arrival in 2008. The building is a historic, well-built structure with marble walls. Unfortunately, over the years improper maintenance has led to cosmetic issues that are evident as you walk through the hallways and classrooms. In order to fulfill legal requirements to educate all students and reduce dropouts, the alternative school was created in 2008 to service students who had been excluded from their neighborhood schools. Under MGL (Massachusetts General Laws) chapter 70, 37H or 37H1/2 schools can exclude students if they present a danger to others. These students have been found to compromise the safety of other students by either: 1) Possessing a dangerous weapon on school grounds; 2) Possessing drugs; or 3) Having a serious pending felony or felony conviction from a charge they received within the community. In early 2011, in order to address the high dropout rate in the district, Urban High also began to enroll students who were failing at the district’s mainstream high school as a dropout prevention alternative for the district. Prior to that, students could only attend the school if they had been excluded from one of the district’s neighborhood schools.

**Urban High Enrollment.** Students go through an intake process with their parent or guardian before entering the program. This valuable information includes the student’s academic history, as well as their clinical and emotional history. The intake is conducted by a licensed mental health counselor (LMHC) who also serves as the school counselor at Urban High (Urban High Intake Form, 2011). The enrollment data and student demographics data reveals a diverse population that presents with several complex factors that have led them to Urban High. For example, many of the students at Urban High are involved with the courts or the Department of Child and Family (DCF). They may also be in foster care or on probation.

The enrollment of the school fluctuates due to many factors. For example, during students’ enrollment, it is not uncommon for them to be adjudicated and transferred into the care
of Department of Youth Service (DYS) “lock up” facilities because of ongoing criminal issues in their communities. Some students are removed from the home and placed in Department of Children and Families (DCF) facilities due to parents not being able to manage or care for them; some are moved out of the district and into new foster care placements, and some end up dropping out of school. Throughout the collection of data for this study, the school fluctuated between servicing 52 and 68 students. All of the students share long histories of poor attendance, retention, or high suspension rates. In June of 2011, 38% of the students had an IEP with a specific learning, health, or intellectual disability. Ninety-five percent of the students qualified for free or reduced lunch. The population of Urban High has a diverse population. In June 2011, African American students comprised 32% and Hispanic students comprised 54% of Urban High’s population (IPASS, 2011).

**Urban High Staff.** In June 2011, school staff included one principal, one school clerk, four middle school teachers, and four high school teachers. The school included three paraprofessionals, one part-time school nurse, one behavioral specialist, a part-time attendance officer, a part-time school resource officer, one school adjustment counselor, and one part-time counselor working under a grant. The school also utilized community agencies to provide individual and group counseling services within the school.

Toward the end of the study, Urban High School became predominately a high school, having only one middle school classroom. I was the principal, and I left for a new principal position in the district in August of 2011. After I left, the school was brought under the leadership of a principal who was also responsible for another school. By winter 2011, a facilitator, who was previously a teacher, took over the leadership role of Urban High.
These changes presented some positive and negative impacts on the study. On the positive side, I was able to conduct many of my interviews without concern of responses being impacted by my supervisory relationship with staff. I also was able to interview students with a more relaxed manner after having already established a rapport with them. On the negative side, at times there were comparisons with regard to past and present practices that I needed to consider during coding. However, because of the timing of my data collection, as well as having some participants who were able to describe their experiences after the transition, I was able to code data that represented the program before and after the transition.

**Participant Data**

Participants in this study included students, parents, and staff from Urban High. Participants were asked open-ended questions about their experiences at Urban High. The questions were chosen to elicit data to answer the research questions. Data collected from participants also included information about their educational histories and current obstacles that impacted their educational success. In addition, participants were asked about the positive and negative characteristics of Urban High that made a difference in their educational setting or that contributed to any successes. It was necessary to explore participant educational histories for them to make comparisons. This also provided data to compare Urban High’s structure and services to effective strategies and practices identified in the literature. Finally, participants were asked to make recommendations to improve the program.

**Multiple Student Obstacles**

One of the questions asked in this study concerned educational equity, implying that students at Urban High have existing challenges that put them at a disadvantage. It was important to understand the different obstacles students had in order to examine if Urban High addresses
educational equity. During the interviews, time was taken to talk to participants about the existing issues and obstacles that students experienced before and during their enrollment at Urban High. This produced data that answered the research questions of the study. It also built rapport because it allowed participants to tell a story about their experiences sequentially. Understanding the needs of the students who attend Urban High is important if the goal is to implement effective practices that address the needs of students at the school. The multiple obstacles students experience became evident during the interviews when student, parent, and staff participants identified and discussed a range of existing obstacles and issues that affected academic progress. These obstacles included difficulty managing anger, using substances, poor attendance, disengagement, living in neighborhoods where gangs were prevalent, negative peer influences, lack of home support, and histories of negative school experiences.

Managing anger and frustration. Students in the study disclosed their difficulty with controlling anger, which sometimes resulted in aggressive outbursts. Many of students who attend Urban High have histories of criminal charges, bringing weapons to school, or assaults. Students were candid in their responses and some were able to disclose some insight into their anger issues. For example, Devon who came out of a Department of Youth Service (DYS) “lock up” for assault of a teacher and possession of drugs responded, “I am short tempered. So anything you say would get me mad real quickly” (Interview 1). Another student, Ellen who was excluded from Clear Water High for assaulting a teacher, responded, “I always have to have the last word” (Interview 1). Another student, Calli, who was excluded from another district’s alternative school for fighting shared, “I have anger issues and I have an attitude. The littlest thing ticks me off” (Interview 6).
Gangs and neighborhoods. Living in an urban city, some students are faced with living in neighborhoods that are plagued with gangs. This is also the case for students at Urban High. Students who live in these neighborhoods sometimes have difficulty overcoming the influences of criminal activity and believe they have limited options. Gang infested neighborhoods surfaced during the interviews with students and staff. For example, Vincent, a student who graduated from Urban High stated:

The gangs are definitely a problem. The older kids are telling the younger kids when they grow up they have to take it over. Some of their fathers and mothers are telling them “this is going to be what you are going to do.” “This is how you are going to make money.” They see the quick money. You hear the rap songs and the movies. I know it sounds ridiculous, but they see that and that’s what they want. They don’t think about how it ends. (Interview 2)

During another student interview, Calli shared:

I hate it. I do not like the environment. It’s not me. I feel like if I am around these people, I am going to end up like them. It’s not easy. Kids don’t lie when they say “you don’t know how I grew up.” I mean it is getting bad because of the economy. It is getting bad. (Interview 6)

Interviews with staff validated the students’ descriptions of how gangs impact their lives and become obstacles to their success. For example, Alexander shared:

And their stuff from outside comes in to school on a daily basis. Whether it is the gang violence, or the problems they have outside the school. It comes into these halls and doors. A lot of our kids haven’t had the opportunity to be kids. They have been forced to grow up. (Interview 12)
Student and staff participants made it clear that living in an urban community brought along challenges that were relevant to students at the school. Students were exposed to violence, gangs, and conflicts in their neighborhoods. They were confronted with making choices about how to respond to their environments in order to survive and exist daily. These responses were not always appropriate for school settings, and so staff had to find ways to respond to these students productively.

**Negative peer influences.** Students making appropriate choices when faced with negative peer pressure surfaced as another obstacle identified by parents and students in the study. Before attending Urban High, students reported that it was difficult to overcome the negative peer pressure that influenced them to make poor choices. These choices included skipping class, skipping school, using substances, and dropping out of school. For example, Richard described peers as having a negative influence on his attendance in his previous school. He described:

> I could take the bus and when I would get to school, I would walk around outside and one of my friends would ask me to skip school and I would skip school. Half of my friends in my freshman classes don’t go to class. They barely go to school now. Like one of my friends has only been to school 15 times this whole year. (Interview 6)

Parents also reported their children had difficulty overcoming peer pressure and negative influences. For example, one parent stated, “She [daughter] can’t be with a whole bunch, she will just go along with them. If they are acting bad, she will act bad” (Interview 8). Another parent believed her son’s substance abuse was influenced by his friends. She shared, “Because some friends influence him. When he started smoking, it changed him. I tried telling him to stop hanging with those friends. The problem is the friends” (Interview 7).
Peer pressure and negative peer influences were part of these students’ lives. These obstacles were common with participants. It made it difficult to stay on a positive path. When friends were making choices to skip school and use substances, students needed to be strong enough and willing to make decisions that did not agree with their friends. Students made it clear that this was difficult. Parents also reported that the negative peer influences were a major challenge for their children.

**Lack of home support and encouragement.** Lack of home support and encouragement surfaced during student and staff interviews as challenges faced by students. Discussions ranged from students not having contact with their parents to parents in the home doing drugs. For example, when asked about the challenges and struggles he experiences, Devon, responded, “Struggle! Not having money. Parents doing drugs.” (Interview 3) Another student, Vincent, who experienced school success after attending Urban High, was asked why he thought not all students were successful. Vincent responded:

Maybe they didn’t have the parents at home that pushed. Because my parents always did push, I just didn’t listen and wanted to be with the “in crowd.” I was doing the stupid stuff they were doing. If you have parents at home who are doing the wrong things and setting a bad example or if you are living on your own and there is no structure at home. I had support at home, thank God, and all the support I had here is what made me do good.

(Interview 2)

All of the Staff who were interviewed believed that lack of parental involvement or home support was a major obstacle for many of the students who attended Urban High. Staff showed a significant amount of empathy for students as they described examples of students who lacked parental support or encouragement. Lack of parental involvement was also identified as a
challenge faced by students in staff questionnaires. For example, in one questionnaire a respondent wrote, “Lack of parental involvement, for example. Although all parents are invited to open house, very few if any attend” (Questionnaire 1). When reflecting on the obstacles students have, Alexander described the challenges parents have in their own lives that have made it difficult for them to support their children. Alexander stated:

They also have the obstacle of their home life, their families. Just sometimes talking to certain parents, you understand why the kids act the way they do. Low expectations, financial struggles, and always worrying about “I have so many bills to pay, you are the least of my worries right now.” They are left on their own to fend for themselves and it becomes problematic. I think they have a lot of quick access to the streets and the things that they need in order to survive, and I think a lot of them especially in this city tend to look to the streets for what they are not getting at home. (Interview 12)

Staff also described the challenges of getting parents to participate in school meetings and any type of parent organization. According to program records, four parents had attended the open house for the 2009 school year, and only two parents had attended the open house for school year 2010 (Urban High Open House File, 2011). Veronica also described the need to get services to come into the school because of the difficulty she had with getting parents to follow through with referrals she had made.

**Negative school experiences.** All students who participated in the study had histories of negative school experiences that led them to Urban High. Negative school experiences became an obstacle to student success because they reinforced negative feelings and influenced negative attitudes about school. Participant histories provided them a point of comparison when asked about how they experienced Urban High. These experiences included interactions with teachers,
poor attendance, suspensions, retention, and failing grades, among other things. Some of these issues were described as interrelated and led to additional negative experiences. For example, Calli explained her experiences thus:

Yeah, I was always out. I used to get my grades in school, they used to be low and I felt like I was a failure so I would always be out. Then I got suspended for 10 days for fighting and then I got locked up. And then for a whole month, I didn’t go to school. I felt like “I am behind” and then I don’t want to go back to school. (Interview 6)

Negative school experiences, such as suspensions, were also common among participants. Suspensions were reported to negatively impact some of the participants’ attendance. For example, when asked about whether students had attendance issues, Ellen responded:

At Clear Water High, I didn’t have an attendance problem that I didn’t go to school but I used to get suspended. I would be at school for two days and then I would get suspended for ten days. All my days out were days of being suspended. Yeah. I was never in school always getting suspended. I was getting suspensions for going off on teachers, and skipping Saturday detentions (Interview 1).

Students who I interviewed had negative perceptions of their teachers and classroom environments in their previous settings. Student participants believed that teachers did not care about them and treated them poorly in their previous school settings. Students also described chaotic and unstructured classrooms that they found difficult to learn in and that impacted their academic success. During the focus group, Benny stated, “The teachers here care. They pull you aside. People at Clear Water High never do that” (Interview 1). During the interviews, students described their previous class environments and how they negatively impacted their schoolwork. When asked about differences in Urban High and her previous school, Sandi responded:
You can’t even do work in that school. The teacher just gives a piece a paper and tells you to do work. And you have kids doing a bunch of stuff and teachers don’t even care. There is music playing. Teachers will swear at you. I have had teachers swear at me. (Interview 4)

Another student Richard shared, “I wasn’t doing that good because it’s hard to learn there because kids are all over the classroom, in the hallways, and it’s just crazy (Interview 6).

The number of complex issues and obstacles students experienced also surfaced during staff interviews, and in the staff questionnaires. Questionnaire respondents listed many obstacles and needs students experienced. The list consisted of: “Poverty; urban culture based on secrecy “snitching”; gang involvement; students here are court involved; social emotional issues; drug use; unprotected sexual relations; violent behavior; lack of social skills; lack of a healthy foundation from parents; poor role models; no vision of possibilities; negative influences” (Questionnaires). During the interviews, all three staff identified similar obstacles. For example, Veronica listed “home life, low socio-economic status, peer pressure, gangs, street life, mental health issues, learning disorders, students who have just been pushed through the system, not getting their needs met” (Interview 11) as major obstacles students face. During Walter’s interview, he focused on the obstacle of low socio-economic status. He stated:

Income, it goes back to about a large portion of our kids get free lunch. A large portion of our kids live in the poorest neighborhoods in our city. Because if you go to the Clear Water High, you will see the kids in honors and AP classes live in the very nice neighborhoods, they don’t get free lunch. I am talking about privilege verses non-privilege. (Interview 13)

During Alexander’s interview, he identified low self-esteem as an obstacle. He shared:
These kids don’t have enough confidence. I think there is a lot of self-esteem issues that prevents them from breaching any type of success, academically, socially, emotionally.

(Interview 12)

**Urban High Positive School Experiences**

This study solicited data about the experiences of students at Urban High. It focused on data that provided insight about what structures and interventions at the school helped students be successful. Positive features of the school included small class size and the low number of students in the school. The small school size allowed teachers to connect and provide students with individual attention. They believed teachers cared for them and wanted students to be successful. Students identified the increased protocols put in place to ensure safety also contributed to their positive experiences. So, too, behavior interventions and discipline procedures. Parents and staff also reported that interventions, such as counseling services and substance abuse treatment, made an impact.

Students, parents, and teachers believed the improvements in student grades, attendance, and behavior interventions were directly related to the interventions and supports at Urban High. Students, parents, and staff reported that the academics were comparable to what they had received at their previous school settings. However, they believed that students were now successful because of the environment and support at Urban High. The majority of participants felt that staff at the school had high expectations and contributed to their desire to graduate and look at postsecondary options.

**School and class size.** Major positive characteristic of Urban High that influenced student success were class size and the low number of students at the school when compared to Clear Water High. Students, parents, and staff reported that the size of the school and the number
of students enrolled had positive impacts on many areas, such as academic intervention, class management, and relationships.

Students reported that, due to the smaller school and class size, they were able to get more work done in class, stay out of trouble, and receive individual attention for academic and emotional support. As Phil reported, “It’s a nice environment. You can actually get stuff done. Teachers can connect with you because you don’t have 40 kids in the classroom” (Interview 5). Some students also reported the small school size made them feel like they were part of a family. More specifically, Calli stated: “It’s like a family. Like it’s a small school and the teachers really care about you. Just like here, it’s a family” (Interview 6). In another example, during the focus group, Benny stated, “There is not as many people so you don’t get caught up as much” (Interview 1). Sandi also shared, “There are less kids in this school so they can pay attention to us more. At Clear Water High, they have 30 kids to one class. The teachers barely know the names” (Interview 4).

Parents also identified class size and school size as positive factors in their children’s successes. Coming from a large high school with over two thousand students, parents believed that small school size allowed teachers to manage their classes better. Barbara stated, “I think everything is hands on with the kids here. They are very active, they do a lot with the kids to give them confidence. It’s a smaller school so obviously the teachers have more time to spend with the kids” (Interview 9). Similarly, Kendra shared, “At Clear Water High, there are a lot of kids to handle, whereas Urban High there are only a few” (Interview 8). She further reported her special needs daughter feeling comfortable enough to ask for academic help when she needed it because of the small class size. Kendra stated:
I think if she wants to ask for extra help, she can ask for extra help. Even though Clear Water High was supposed to have somebody to help her, but I don’t know if it was because of the big class sizes she didn’t ask for help. I think she never asked for it, so they weren’t trying to give it to her. Clear Water High did not follow it at all. Urban High followed it to a T. They made sure that I understood what was going to happen, whatever I needed. They were on point with that. I really like that. (Interview 8)

Parents believed their children received emotional support because of the small school size. This was helpful to the students who had emotional difficulties that interrupted their school day. Kendra stated, “They’ll ask Karen what her problem is. She likes that. They will ask her to come out of the classroom and talk about it. I think the smaller school works well for my child” (Interview 8).

Staff also believed the small school size significantly contributed to student success. The theme of small class size showed up in interviews and in staff questionnaires. In the questionnaire when asked about positive characteristics of Urban High, two teachers responded, “There is a good staff to student ratio” (Questionnaire 2). Another staff member listed, “school size and class size” (Questionnaire 4) as a positive characteristic of the school. In all three interviews, staff believed that the smaller class size allowed them to connect with students. During an interview, Walter stated, “We provide a small classroom and hopefully we don’t get too large. Because I believe that is the essential ingredient in our success here at the high school side” (Interview 13). Small class size was also mentioned by Alexander. When asked about positive components of the program and experiences, Alexander stated: “I like the small classes, small classes definitely work. You really get to know them as a person. What makes them tick,
what makes them laugh. Because it’s a small environment, it becomes more family oriented” (Interview 12).

**Staff and student relationships.** The relationships staff developed with students at Urban High surfaced during the study as another important factor to student success. Students and parents believed that staff genuinely cared about students, which led to positive relationships between staff and students. This was confirmed during staff interviews when staff described their feelings of students and how they looked forward to connecting with students. It was through these connections that they were able to help students, both academically and emotionally.

Students perceive the teachers at Urban High as caring, respectful, patient, and helpful. In the Student Connective Survey, all 16 students who took the survey either stated they agreed or strongly agreed with the statements: “My teachers really care about me”; and “My teacher really cares about how I am doing in school.” Fifteen out of 16 students agreed or strongly agreed with the statement: “There are people in this school who will help me if I need it” (Urban High Student Connection Survey, 2011). During the interviews, all students reported that there were people at Urban High they could go to if they needed help. While talking about the teachers at Urban High, Benny stated, “These teachers got respect. Yeah, I actually like these teachers a lot” (Interview 1). Another student, Calli, identified teachers as “the best thing” at Urban High (Interview 6). During David’s interview when he was asked what the best things about Urban High were, he responded:

The teachers. Honest to God. I like the teachers a lot. They have good personalities. They are good to us. They get to know you; they build a relationship with you. I like having a relationship with my teachers. They actually build a relationship with you.

(Interview 3)
Calli stated, “The teachers really care about you. Just like a family, you can trust them and they will help you with everything and they will sit down with you” (Interview 6). Several of the students who were interviewed described specific ways that teachers made them feel like they cared about students. During the focus group, Benny responded, “They recognize that something is wrong” (Interview 1). Ellen added to the discussion, “It’s like the teachers take the time to talk to kids. If they see me come to school and I am not talking to anyone they will ask me what’s wrong and pull me aside and ask me if everything okay” (Interview 1). Another student Carl responded “They don’t judge you” (Interview 1). Another student, Ellen, stated, “They care. The teachers here care. They pull you aside and tell you…we know you can do it. They motivate you” (Interview 1).

Many students felt their relationships with teachers helped them become engaged with their academics and become academically successful. Prior to attending Urban High, students reported having difficulty with academic success because they did not always understand the material and would give up easily. During Carl’s interview, he described how teachers at Urban High helped improve his academics: “My other school the teachers weren’t like they are here. Over here, if you don’t do your work they try to give it to you again and work with you. At other schools, if you don’t do the work you just get Fs” (Interview 1). Ellen interjected, “Some of us don’t always get it and here, after they explain it to the whole class, they will explain it again until we understand it” (Interview 1). Under the student support construct of the Student Connection Survey, all 16 students agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements: “My teachers”: “Really listens to what I have to say”; “Is willing to give extra help on school work if I need it”; “Helps me catch up if I am behind”; “Notices if I have trouble learning
something”; and “Will help me improve my work if I do poorly on an assignment” (Urban High Student Connection Survey, 2011).

Parents also identified relationships between Urban High staff and their children as helpful to their children’s successes. They also acknowledge their own relationships and the communication they had with teachers as positive and helpful. For example, Rosa shared, “The teachers help me a lot here. Nice teachers, they talk to him and me all the time. They help him a lot and I appreciate it” (Interview 7). During Kendra’s interview, she stated, “I like that the teachers are close to the kids. They really want to get involved” (Interview 8). Another parent, Barbara, highlighted the phone calls she received from teachers as helpful. She stated, “Yeah. I get calls all the time. The teachers are great here. I never got that before. The calls I use to get were about my son getting in trouble” (Interview 9).

Staff reciprocated the positive theme of relationships with students. It was very important to staff to let students know they cared for them. They believed this was the only way they could have a positive impact on their academic success. For example, Alexander stated:

> Every child that comes through our doors should know they are welcomed, they are loved, they are appreciated and they do get that here. Whether they yell and call you a lot of names, they scream at you and tell you how much they hate you, and all that other jazz. (Interview 12)

Another staff, Walter, stated, “I think that your approach should be a caring one, one that is concerned. I have to let students know that I care about them. Before I can get them to work, they have to know I care” (Interview 13).

**Supervision and safety.** The need for a high level of supervision at Urban High is required because of the types of offenses students committed before coming to the school. They
have been excluded from their neighborhood schools under Massachusetts General Law 37H, which has deemed these students dangerous to the school environment. Many of these students have brought drugs or dangerous weapons to school. During the intake, parents and students are informed of the metal detector that all students need to go through. Students also need to empty the contents of their pockets before entering the building. During the interviews, students reported feeling safer attending Urban High because of these procedures.

The level of supervision at Urban High was something different from previous schools that students had attended. Participants reported that the supervision limited students’ opportunities to make bad decisions and also made them feel safer in school. During the focus group, students reported that the level of supervision prevented them from making bad decisions like skipping class. Devon stated, “You can’t skip class here. You can’t leave school here. You can’t get away with things here like you can at a regular high school” (Interview 1). Another student stated, “You don’t do things because you’re going to get caught” (Interview 1). Adam added, “I always skipped school. But now I have perfect attendance. We could get away with it; everyone is on your ass here” (Interview 1). During an individual interview, Sandi stated:

This school has strict rules and the teachers are better here. Bathroom rules, in the morning there is check-in rules, it’s crazy. You can’t go walking in the halls. too. You can’t just walk around. Here we need someone to bring you to the bathrooms and here they lock the bathrooms. You can’t skip class here. (Interview 4)

Parents also mentioned the level of supervision as a positive characteristic at Urban High during their interviews. In one example, Rosa shared:
He comes to school every day, he can’t go outside and leave school. The teachers can take care of him. He is okay now. He needs to be here. They teach him respect. He doesn’t have the freedom to go everywhere like at the other school. (Interview 7)

Phil, who has been excluded from his mainstream schools twice; the first time for making a bomb threat and the second time for bringing in a knife, responded:

Here, I can learn. I am basically safer. There is less drugs going through the school. There are a lot of drugs, weapons and dangerous kids over there, crazy things. All students who enter the building at Urban High are searched and have to go through a metal detector. All the exit doors are alarmed and will go off if the door is opened. (Interview 5)

Sandi also shared, “I feel a lot safer here” (Interview 4). In the Student Connection Survey, 15 out of 16 students reported they felt either mostly safe or very safe in the hallways and the bathroom of the school. All 16 students surveyed stated they were mostly safe or very safe in their classes. In the same survey, 15 out of 16 students either strongly disagree or disagreed with the statement: “I worry about crime and violence in my school.” During another interview, Richard shared, “I always saw kids over at Clear Water High with weapons and stuff” (Interview 6). When asked if the metal detector made him feel safer, Richard responded:

Yes, they also have alarms on the doors. There were always kids walking out of Clear Water High. People who didn’t belong there coming in and fighting. Yeah. You can’t have your phone here to text someone to come in and fight. (Interview 6)

The metal detector at Urban High is a deterrent to students who may bring in weapons. During an interview, Phil stated, “Security check-in makes me feel safe. I don’t see any knives here in school. It keeps me from bringing in anything I shouldn’t” (Interview 5). When a
different student was asked if he would bring a weapon into Urban High, Benny responded, “No, because I can’t get through the metal detector” (Interview 1). When asked if he would if there was not a metal detector, he replied, “Yeah probably. If I have a knife, but I would keep it in my pocket” (Interview 1).

**Services and interventions.** As described in previous sections, students at Urban High have complex and diverse needs that require intervention. These needs are barriers to students becoming academically successful. Consequently, interventions and services are put into place with the goal of addressing the multiple needs of students. As described by Alexander during his interview, “Here, there is a ‘whole child’ approach. When I say the ‘whole child’ I mean getting them food, hooked up with programs that are going to help them before we can teach them” (Interview 12). During another staff interview, Veronica provided a list of supports that were offered to students:

- We offer mentoring which is like a “big brother,” “big sister” service. The difference is that typically it is community base, but our mentor will come here. They will work with the student in the school and in the community. We offer individual counseling. We have an agency that comes into the school because a lot of parents don’t have the transportation to get to the clinic. We offer groups. Right now, we have anger management and substance abuse. The other thing we offer is drug testing. We have a laboratory that comes into the school. We offer as much of academic support as possible. We know if they don’t address their issues they can never focus on their academics so they just fall behind. That is why they are already behind. (Interview 11)
Some of the services offered were also repeated in the questionnaires with some additions. In one questionnaire, when asked about what services are offered, the respondent wrote, “great effort is made on helping students with whatever needs they have” (Questionnaire 4).

Substance abuse treatment. One of the services provided at Urban High is substance abuse treatment. Some students have been excluded from their previous schools for possession of drugs. During interviews, some students who attend Urban High admitted that they continued to use substances. During the intake process, the licensed counselor will make referrals after receiving parental consent. Students in treatment are provided drug counseling along with drug testing. Some students continue to use substances; however, services are always available to them. During the interviews, students were candid about their use. For example, Adam who was excluded from his neighborhood school for possession of drugs responded, “Yes, I smoke weed. I am sometimes called a “pot head” (Interview 1). Another student, David, responded, “I smoke weed but who doesn’t do that in this society” (Interview 3). Two of the students interviewed discussed the drug testing conducted at school and their attempts to reduce usage. Richard stated, “My percentage has been going down” (Interview 6). Parents were also receptive to the drug testing. As Rosa stated during her interview: “He has drug tests. We have to keep checking. I looked for help. I told him, I do this because I love you” (Interview 7).

Students are also offered other services such as individual and group counseling to work on existing issues. During one of the staff interviews, Veronica shared:

Students do have drug issues. If we find them to have a specific issue, they are assigned to the specific group. Most of all students will be involved in a substance abuse group; some are assigned to an anger management group, if we recognize them to have an anger
management issue. The majority of our students are in some type of counseling. (Interview 11)

Some students and parents also mentioned the counseling services offered at Urban High as helpful. David shared, “I look forward to seeing [Counselor] once a week” (Interview 3). During a parent interview, Rosa shared, “The counseling, the services are good, the services are great. This is the first time a school has helped me a lot” (Interview 7).

**Discipline/behavior interventions.** Students who come to Urban High need assistance with their behaviors and help with understanding how to deal with their anger and frustrations. Urban High uses a behavior system in addition to having a behavioral therapist to help students work on these issues. The behavioral system is based on a token economy that reinforces appropriate behaviors. In addition, students can move up a level system where they can earn additional privileges. Students and teachers can also utilize the behavioral therapist to manage inappropriate behaviors throughout the day. The behavioral therapist’s room can be used for self-timeouts that students initiate if they feel they need a quiet place outside the classroom. It can also be used as a place where teachers can send students. Once they have calmed down and accepted responsibility for their actions and in some cases talked directly with the teacher, they can then return to class. This is used instead of suspension in many cases. Many of the students identified the behavior system as helpful. For example, David responded, “There is not as much discipline in others school. They teach you respect” (Interview 3). Another student shared, “Most of us have been here for three years. They tell you, ‘You should think about it first. Go take a self-timeout.’ So after hearing that all in your head, you just think about it now” (Interview 1).

Students also recognized the behavior interventions at Urban High as alternatives to suspensions. When asked if the behavioral system was helpful, Richard shared:
Going to Mr. ….. room (behavioral specialist). You get written up and go in there and then go on with your day. You have to fill out a paper; why you are in there, why you did it, how it affected you and others. (Interview 6)

During the focus group, Ellen shared:

Other schools just suspend you. Here, they try to discipline us. Like if you come in late. Or if you don’t want to be bothered and you get upset you can go sit in a room and cool off. They have different choices. At Clear Water High, you just get suspended for three days. You get a vacation you get your way basically. They don’t care. (Interview 1)

The behavioral system also had a positive impact on students’ academic success. Students believed that they had a better learning experience because of the discipline at Urban High. For example, Richard shared:

There is more discipline, so it’s better learning. Yeah, they don’t let the kids like walk around in hallways, jump around in the classrooms. Sometimes at Clear Water High, I actually wanted to do my work and everyone would be talking and you just get aggravated. But here, if I want to do work and someone is acting up in class, I can go to another class to do my work. You can just go there (behavioral therapist office).

(I Interview 6)

Credit recovery opportunities. Students who attend Urban High have opportunities to make up credits they have missed over the years. These opportunities include taking additional classes during the day, taking additional online classes, creative individual scheduling, and having opportunities to provide community service to gain credits. Parents and students in the study acknowledged and identified these opportunities as positive and helpful. For example, one parent, Barbara, stated, “He was a sophomore when he came here, but he brought up his credits
where he is caught up to be a senior. He lost two years at Clear Water. Every year he just failed with F, F, and F’s” (Interview 9). Staff also discussed the importance of offering additional opportunities for students to earn credits. During her interview, Veronica shared:

We offer credit recovery for the kids. We have a lot of kids between the ages of 16 and 18 that are not in their grade level. They may be one or two grades behind, which causes them to lack motivation. (Interview 11)

**Students remaining at Urban High.** Overall, parents and students reported being satisfied with their experiences at Urban High. Even though some of the students interviewed were eligible to return to the mainstream school, all of the parents and students reported that they wanted to remain at Urban High. Many students and parents recognized that if they did return to their previous school setting, they would not be successful and might dropout of school. For example, David shared:

I know if I returned I would not care about anything. My brother doesn’t have a relationship with any of his teachers at Clear Water High. I like having a relationship with my teachers. I’d rather stay here. (Interview 3)

Parents were very adamant about their children remaining at Urban High. However, they also explained that they were very worried about their children attending the alternative school because of the stigma connected to alternative schools. Their opinions quickly changed, however, once they had experienced the school. Two out of the three parents interviewed believed that their child would be a dropout if they did not remain at Urban High. For example, Kendra stated:

Clear Water is not equipped for [daughter]. I think if she went to Clear Water High, she would get lost. I don’t think she will graduate from Clear Water High. I know if she stays
at Urban High, she will. And look she does college applications, and all that other stuff. She plans on going to college. (Interview 8)

Another parent, Barbara, was strongly against her son returning to Clear Water High and believed if he did return, he would have dropped out of school. She stated:

It would have just turned around and be the same thing. They don’t care, I am sorry but they don’t. I am very disappointed. He is 18, he could sign himself out if he wanted to but he hasn’t. I think that should tell you something right there. If he was at Clear Water High, he would be long gone. (Interview 9)

Parents and students were adamant about not wanting to return to the mainstream setting. Students wanted to remain at the alternative school because of the significant changes they had experienced since attending the school. They strongly believed that if they did return they would not continue to be successful. Many negative perceptions they had about the program changed once they had experienced the school.

**Positive impacts on attendance, behavior, and academic success.** Participants in the study all reported Urban High had a positive impact on students’ attendance, behavior, and overall academic success. Parents and students also reported that students began caring about school once they began attending Urban High. During the focus group, Ellen stated, “Before I used to not care about school, get bad grades. Now I get A’s and B’s, I am more respectful and I don’t have so much anger. I can control my anger now” (Interview 1). Devon added during the discussion, “A couple of years ago, I just never cared. I was crazy back in the day. Now I turned my life around because the teachers are trying to help you out” (Interview 1). Parents also shared examples of their child’s transformation. According to Barbara:
My son’s attendance there was horrible. He hated it. He never wanted to go to school. He was always trying to find a way to get out of school. It was always a big fight every day. It was ridiculous. It was a big turnaround. I don’t have to argue with him about going to school. He wants to go. I mean, he was sick one day, and I was like “why don’t you stay home.” He was, “No, I want to have perfect attendance.” He looks forward to coming to school now. (Interview 9)

Ultimately, attendance appeared to have been the biggest impact. All students reported better attendance since coming to Urban High. Benny shared, “I always skipped school. But now, I have perfect attendance” (Interview 1). In another example, Richard shared, “My attendance wasn’t that good. I missed about 37 days last year. I have only missed 1 day, and I have never been suspended” (Interview 6).

During the interviews, all students also reported a positive impact on their grades since attending Urban High. In one example, when students were asked to compare their grades before and after attending Urban High, Carl responded, “From F’s to B’s and C’s” (Interview 1). In another interview, Benny responded:

Freshman and sophomore year I got all F’s. My freshman and sophomore year, I got about 60 to 70 conduct cards each year. I was always out. And I just did bad. Since I have been here, I get As B’s and C’s, and I don’t get in trouble anymore. (Interview 1)

Students also discussed a positive impact on their behavior and treatment of others since coming to Urban High. Carl shared, “I used to act up and show off. I used to be a follower. I was always disrespectful to teachers now I am respectful” (Interview 1). During the focus group discussion, Devon stated, “I used to skip school to go smoke. But now I don’t do that no more. I
used to do bad stuff for real I used to do crazy stuff. I used to tell teachers F U and walk out of
the class” (Interview 1).

**Educational Equality and Equity**

The final question of this study attempted to determine if practices used at Urban High
addressed educational equity and equality. Educational Equality refers to students receiving the
same education, opportunities, and services as those students at the district’s mainstream school.
Educational Equity refers to students who have existing obstacles receiving any additional
supports they need to be successful. This applies to the program’s mission, vision, practices, and
core beliefs. In addition to the practices previously discussed, this research question required me
to ask staff about their beliefs about students’ success and the expectations they had for students.
In turn, students and parents were asked if they thought the staff believed in their future success.
As previously discussed, the student population at Urban High has many obstacles and complex
issues that interfered with their success. In addition to these obstacles, the community attaches
negative stigmas to the alternative school in the district, including the belief that students at
Urban High are not provided the same level of expectations and rigor as students in mainstream
schools. Some of the participants, however, challenged these negative perceptions.

**Understanding the concept of educational equity.** The answers from staff
questionnaires provided some interesting responses. It appears that staff had differing views
about equity and equality and considered each concept to be relative. The questionnaires asked if
participants thought Urban High provided educational equity and equality to students who
attended. Three out of the four respondents believed they did. However, one of the respondents
responded “yes and no.” One respondent believed the school did provide students with many
supports; however, not all students took advantage of them: “Students are given individual
attention, when needed, academically, for social issues, and personal issues. These opportunities appear to be offered to all of our students. Not all students choose to utilize them” (Questionnaire 1). Another respondent felt strongly that the school provided equity, “Yes, absolutely. We give core subjects and have a variety of other activities. Face facts, our students are only willing to provide limited amount of effort. Most are very capable of working much harder academically” (Questionnaire 2). Another responded, “Yes and No. Urban High does not offer everything Clear Water does have but will try to use other opportunities such as online resources. When compared to Clear Water, there is equality. However, when compared to other districts, it is not equitable” (Questionnaire 4).

**Access to courses.** Urban High is significantly smaller than the mainstream high school in the district. The low numbers of students translates to fewer staff and fewer options. In addition to this, many of the students who attend are missing core credit classes they need to graduate. Urban High does not have the same number of electives, number of different sciences, or options for higher leveled classes, like Advanced Placement classes, as those offered at Clear Water High. Through additional grant funding, Urban High does offer some electives such as photography and art, but they are rotated and not always offered. Urban High offers online classes for additional options and electives. However, because students at Urban High are focused on making up credits to satisfy graduation requirements, they rarely have the time in their schedule to take additional electives. Students take courses that meet the foreign language requirement on the computer through software purchased by the district. This surfaced during a parent interview. When asked about what could improve at Urban High, Barbara responded, “Probably a little bit more with the classes they are offering. Maybe they need someone who can teach the Chemistry class instead of taking it online” (Interview 9).
**Expectations and rigor.** Student participants reported they felt teachers had high expectations. Students also reported receiving comparable work at Urban High but felt the work was easier because of the support they were provided. In the *Students Connection Survey*, 15 out of 16 students *agreed or strongly agreed* with the following statements: “My teacher expects me to do my best all the time”; “My teacher expects everyone to work hard”; “My teacher believes I can do well in school.” 1 out of 15 students *disagreed*. During the focus group, Devon shared, “I think people here expect you to do better. They are trying to help you get over your past. They say everyone makes mistake, no one is perfect. And try to get you over that bump” (Interview 1).

Students believed the work was the same; however, because of the environment and the ability for teachers to work with students more individually, they were able to learn successfully. When asked about the level of work they were getting, Devon stated:

> It’s not easy work because in high school I bet you they are doing the same thing we are doing. But the teacher they have… they are doing it in long steps dragging it out…making it hard for you. But here you have the teacher explaining it to you. You can say “I don’t get it” and they will explain it to you. In Clear Water High, if you don’t get it, you have 30 kids in front of you. You try helping out a student you are going to get hit in the back of the head with paper balls. (Interview 1)

During her individual interview, Sandi described one of her classes at Urban High, “Science is where we do the most thinking. This year, I am learning new things” (Interview 4). When asked if academics were challenging at Urban High in comparison to the Clear Water High, Richard responded:
The work is the same. I find it easier to get it done because you have more individual help and you learn more and get more from the teacher because there are less kids in the class talking and stuff. So it’s easier because of that. (Interview 6)

High expectations were shared by all three staff members; however, there were some indications that they believed that not all staff working at Urban High had them. When asked what is important for students to be successful, Veronica responded:

We need to have high expectations of them. If we lower our expectations of kids, we are not preparing them for their future in society. Some people are handholding; some people are letting them do what they want. I think there are teachers giving in to kids a little bit more and not understanding the impact that is having. (Interview 11)

Another staff interviewed believed in empowering students by holding high expectations in the classroom. While discussing his belief in students, he shared:

One of my classroom rules is “To choose your conversations and your communities appropriately.” If you are always hanging around the drug dealer who is always wanting you to go and “push and push and push,” that’s fine but “where does it get to you?” It gets you either locked up or dead. Why would you want to do that? But if you are choosing the people who are playing the sports, in the music programs, who have some type of purpose, people who want to do something positive with their life, who want to go to college, they want to succeed by any means necessary, and that is possible for you too. (Interview 12)

One questionnaire respondent also believed some staff did not always believe that all students could be successful. When asked about the negative characteristics of Urban High, one respondent wrote, “Some staff do not sincerely believe that the students can make it big. They
have subconsciously and consciously minimized student expectations” (Questionnaire 4).

Alexander also believed that some staff did not address students’ negative behaviors because they found it easier to avoid the challenge it brought. When asked about the negative experiences, Alexander talked about his own experiences, which echoed some of the communities’ negative perceptions of the students at the program, as well as staff who had difficulty setting limits and disciplining students. He reflected:

A lot of people feel as though because of who they are because of their name, because of the color of their skin, because of the school they were associated with, because of the town or the neighborhood they live in, because of their socio-economic status, people feel as though, “they will never make it.” These kids are looking for, “spend time with me, get to know me as a person, challenge me, say no to me, every child wants to be told no, they want parameters, and they want to know what they can and cannot do.” So the person who sits and is a push over, they lose a lot respect for. Discipline does not have to be an enemy of success. (Interview 12)

The idea that all staff did not have high expectations was echoed in one of the questionnaire responses. When asked about the negative characteristics of the program, Questionnaire 3 responded, “Unrealistic expectations for students” (Questionnaire 3).

**Postsecondary planning.** Teachers at Urban High work with students on planning for graduation. This surfaced during interviews on many occasions. In the Student Connection Survey, all 16 students agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements: “My teachers encourage me to continue my education after high school”; “My teacher encourages me to work hard in school.” Students were also asked about post-graduation plans. During the interviews, all students were able to verbalize their desired employment plans and identify actual colleges they
were applying to. They were also beginning to visit schools and learn more about existing programs. For example, Ellen shared, “I applied, so far, for four colleges. I applied for Wheelock in Boston, Dean College, BCC and Hofstra in New York. I am going to visit with my mom” (Interview 1). Other examples included, Devon who stated, that he had applied to “UMASS Amherst, ITT, and BCC” (Interview 1). Carl responded, “I am going to apply to MASS Maritime. I want to be a fisherman” (Interview 1). Adam responded, “I applied to URI, UMASS, and BCC for electrical engineering. I want to be an electrician” (Interview 1). When asked if he thought Urban High could prepare her for college, Calli responded, “Yeah, (teacher) makes us a binder. It is getting me set for BCC. Yeah, definitely” (Interview 6).

All students reported that teachers at Urban High altered their ideas about college. When asked at what point students began thinking about college, Benny responded, “Before I came here I was never going to go to college. I was going to quit school. But when I got here (teacher) kept talking about it” (Interview 1). Ellen responded, “(teacher) motivates you. ‘College guys’ that’s all you here, ‘college guys, you are going to college’” (Interview 1). Benny responded, “Everything is college with him. It just made you want to go to college” (Interview 1). Ellen stated, “He made everyone a college binder” (Interview 1).

Parents also believed that Urban High encouraged students to attend college. Parents in the study admitted that they themselves did not believe their child was going to attend college before they attended Urban High. During her interview, Barbara shared how she found out her daughter wanted to attend college. During this interview, she also shared her beliefs about college as well as her regret of not attending herself. When discussing her daughter’s future and plans for college, Kendra shared:
She is completing college applications, and all that other stuff. She plans on going to college. I know (teacher) is a big part of that college thing. But I didn’t even know that she wanted to go to college until (teacher) told me. Because she never said anything. So he (teacher) was like “oh yeah, she wants to do this…” I was like “are you serious?” I was just trying to get her through high school. But now I tell her, “you can’t do anything without a bachelor degree.” (Interview 8)

Another parent also shared her son’s new vision of college. Barbara stated, “I think you guys do a great job here. (Son) wants to go to college now, he’s talking about it. He never ever would mention that before. It’s like a whole different him” (Interview 9). During his interview Alexander, a teacher, described the amount of work he does with students and parents to prepare them for searching, attending, and paying for college. Alexander explained:

It is basically looking into what colleges are right for the kids, it’s getting them talking about it, getting to use the lingo. Having them research colleges and getting interested in something they can study and they feel comfortable studying. Getting them to go on college tours, getting them prepared for the whole application process, working with families and trying to get them involved, having a FASFA training, and understanding subsidized loans and unsubsidized loans. Helping to promote the importance of college and how they can benefit from it. (Interview 12)

Urban High visits area colleges as a way to help students learn about their options when they graduate from high school. Students identified the college tours as being helpful in providing students with a different perspective, as well as expanding their perspective of reality and possibilities. One student who had graduated from Urban High the previous year was asked about what was helpful, Vincent stated:
Keep doing the college tours. I love all the college tours to let them know there is a
different world a whole big world; we are a little piece here in Clear Water. A lot of these
kids think that this is it, this is their world. They are going to stay in Clear Water and not
leave it. It lets them know you don’t have to stay in Clear Water. A lot of these kids are
trapped here. There is more than the hoods and the projects. Actually there is good stuff
out there, and you could be somebody, anything you really want. (Interview 2)

**Recommendations for Urban High**

Participants were asked to make recommendations to the program. In addition, they were
asked if there was anything they wanted changed at the program. Surprisingly, many of the
students who were interviewed had difficulty identifying anything they wanted to change.
Students identified making cosmetic changes to the building and getting an intercom at the
school. However, many of the participants made recommendations for the program.
Recommendations included hiring specialized staff, offering specialized professional
development, having more exposure to additional postsecondary options, having more electives
and extra curricula activities, and having additional options for students who did not respond to
the program.

The cosmetic appearance of the school and getting an intercom system at the school were
identified as characteristics of the program that a participant did not like. For example, when
asked about what he didn’t like about the program, Phil responded, “It could use a little paint,
cleaner floors. The ceilings are chipping in the hallways. If we could put in an intercom system
to make announce bell periods and schedules” (Interview 5). Coincidentally, this issue surfaced
during an interview with a staff member as well. While Alexander was being interviewed, his
pocket alarm went off. He had to excuse himself so that he could announce to staff on his two-
way radio that it was time to transition to the next period. In addition, the cosmetic condition of
the building surfaced in one of the questionnaires. For example, a response to the question asking
about negative characteristics of the program read, “The building is not well maintained (peeling
paint, dirty carpets, lack of sufficient heat in the winter” (Questionnaire 1).

**Specialized staff.** While several staff made recommendations related to the need for
specialized, highly qualified and experienced staff working in the school, students took a
different approach. They focused more on their teachers’ personalities and abilities to relate to
their needs and form connections. It was a staff person’s interpersonal skills that many students
credited as the reason for their success at Urban High. It was only until the connection was made
that students would begin to experience academic success. Students also made comparisons
between the staff at Urban High and other school settings. It was during these comparisons that
students described the type of personalities and human characteristics that were needed in the
staff at the school. Staff also spent a significant amount of time discussing the types of skills
needed to connect with students. For example, during a student interview, while discussing staff,
Vincent stated:

> Some teachers are like a “professor” so they didn’t really help us as much. Kids just ate
> them up because of their personality. Not everyone is cut out to teach in this place. Staff
> need to have a background in it. Not a judging staff or a staff that just bids in because
> there is no other spots. Someone that actually wants to be here. (Interview 2)

There was a strong consensus among all of the individuals interviewed that alternative
schools, such as Urban High, requires a highly qualified, eclectic and flexible staff to be
successful. In addition to being a gifted content teacher, they need to have strong behavior
management skills, patience, high expectations and the genuine belief that all students can be
successful. These qualities and traits are not easy to find in a single individual. As Vincent stated, “Not everyone is cut out to teach in this place” (Interview 2). This overall description was shared by the counselor and one of the teachers who were interviewed. Veronica shared:

   We need someone with patience. We need someone who is going to understand this population and where they are coming from and not pretend these kids don’t exist or the issues don’t exist. Maybe not judge them. These kids can see through people and they need to be genuinely caring. (Interview 11)

Alexander shared:

   Not everyone can do this job. There are some people who are great at what they do, they know their content, but there is a disconnect with the kids. There is a drive that comes from passion that you need to have. It’s rooting for the underdog at the end of the day. (Interview 12)

   One common theme that came up during the interviews with staff is that teachers and staff who work at Urban High have multiple responsibilities that are not listed on their description in other mainstream schools. For example, one of the teachers interviewed taught all the High School English classes in the school in addition to working as the school’s guidance counselor reviewing transcripts and helping students apply to colleges. Alexander shared the following experiences teaching at Urban High:

   The difference here is that you are asked to do things more than you are required to do. We need to make them the best they can be. It is redirecting behaviors, and helping them understand there is so much to life than what they know, and open their mind and get them to experience life beyond their city, or behind their own backyard. (Interview 12)
Alexander paints a picture of the multi-faceted talents a teacher at Urban High must possess in addition the revelation that it takes more than the teaching of the standard to educate these young minds. Walter, another teacher, encompassed the difficulty he has experienced in his position when he stated: “Trying to find this equilibrium is a challenge. Lesson planning, curriculum, behavior modification. How do I get kids to behave, believe, and learn” (Interview 13)

Having a genuine belief in students’ success was also a strong theme that surfaced during the study. Along with this belief came staff needing to demonstrate perseverance toward working with students who did not always believe they could be successful. According to staff interviewed, this was a difficult task that sometimes required a lot of patience and determination. Staff at Urban High dedicate a lot of time and energy to students who many others have turned away. During the interviews, staff presented with compassion and beliefs about the students. For example, during Walter’s interview, he stated:

Look at Mr. (teacher) that is another thing that makes him so valuable, because he will never give up on that idea that “you know this kid can do it.” He invests all that time and energy just trying to get those kids down to DC. Look at what he did for (student) with his criminal background, I mean talk about criminal background and a family of criminal activity. I think a lot of people in different districts would have written him off and say, “It doesn’t make sense to invest my time in this kid.” But this is what we do on a daily basis. This is what I commend about our staff at Urban High. (Interview 13)

**Professional development.** Professional development is vital to staff who must wear a multitude of hats throughout the day. Whether it be behavioral management, specialized algebra, substance abuse, writing across the content areas, or being familiar with current gang activity in the city, staff at the school need and want specialized professional development. When
discussing professional development at Urban High, Alexander stated, “If we better understand who our clientele is, the better we can do academically” (Interview 12). Even though all staff agreed that professional development was needed, staff did not feel that the program provided them with enough training to prepare them for all they needed to know about servicing the population. For example, Walter shared:

I don’t think the professional development here is not strong at all. I believe our professional development needs to be a bi-weekly thing. Bi-weekly, and I don’t mean just curriculum, lesson planning and going over MCAS data, I mean going over behavior mod, bouncing things off each other’s head. That is continued growth not just once or twice a year. (Interview 13)

**Additional preparation of postsecondary options.** Although many students and parents were pleased with the schools’ focus on college preparation, they also recommended more career training be available at Urban High. Several respondents discussed the need for additional pathways and options. For example, vocational training or the military could be viable gateways for some students to gain twenty-first century skills. For example, when asked about if there was anything that should be changed about Urban High, Vincent responded:

I just wish there were more alternatives like military or trade schools or a shop or if they could be an apprentice. We did culinary, but if we could do more, because some of these kids are not going to go to college and they don’t want to go to college. There are other pathways and I wish we had more. But definitely keep enforcing college but having other alternatives or gateways to other places like military. (Interview 2)

**Extracurricular activities and additional electives.** Urban High does not offer the same range of extracurricular activities as the mainstream high school. Sports and other activities, such
as JROTC, are options for Urban High students who do not pose a safety risk at the district’s comprehensive high school. However, this applies to minimal students. One parent recommended that Urban High offer afterschool programming that offered some options for students. For example, when asked how Urban High could be improved, Kendra responded, “I think if they could have more sports or more after school stuff. That would have been nice” (Interview 8).

**Additional alternatives for students.** Another recommendation that surfaced during the study was students having additional alternatives to their education. These alternatives would include activities outside of the regular school day at Urban High. During the data collection of the study, current alternatives were mentioned, such as an after school program for students who had difficulty managing their behaviors during the school day. This after school program provided online classes and a modified schedule for those students. During his interview, Walter identified a need for additional options for students who were having difficulties in addition to maintaining the small class size by expanding options for some students. Walter shared, “I think if we could expand our afterschool program for those kids who struggle in the day. I think those things could lead to some more success” (Interview 13).

**Summary**

This evaluation study conducted at Urban High School produced valuable and in-depth information utilizing qualitative research methods. Personal thoughts, feelings, and experiences from students, parents, and staff of the program were collected through interviews, a student survey, staff questionnaires, and a focus group, along with other sources of data, such as program documents, student statistical and demographic data. The study solicited information to answer the four presented research questions. Prior to attending Urban High, students had histories of
failing grades, poor attendance, and negative behaviors that led them to the school. All participants identified specific characteristics of the program that contributed to their individual successes. School size, caring and dedicated personnel, increased supervision, safety protocols, behavior interventions, and services at the program contributed to their academic success. Participants reported that the program’s structure, characteristics, and practices contributed to improving students’ attendance, grades, and behavior. Having a clear understanding of the multiple obstacles, challenges, and issues students face was essential to students’ success in the program. Staff participants emphasized the need to support students comprehensively by using a “whole child” approach. Parents were very satisfied with their children’s success at the program and stressed they did not want their child to return to the mainstream school in the district.

Participants provided data with mixed outcomes that focused on the educational equality and equity questions. With regard to educational equality, the program provides all the core subjects and some electives that are offered at Clear Water. However, because of its small size, and reduced number of staff, it cannot offer all the same academic opportunities. Urban High does attempt to offer students additional classes through an online course catalogue. With regard to educational equity, Urban High’s core beliefs and vision does support educational equity. Staff participants who were interviewed appeared to have a good understanding of student obstacles and appeared to work hard when helping students overcome them. However, there was some data to support that not all staff shared the genuine belief that all students could be successful. Students and parents believed that staff had high expectations for students and reported that the program directly impacted their current desires to attend college.

Participants were asked to make recommendations to improve the program. All participants agreed that having specialized staff and teachers at the program was important to
student success. Staff members needed to be willing to accept the additional responsibilities and have the right kind of personalities and skills to work at the school. Staff needed to care, connect, and believe in the students’ success. Ongoing professional development was also recommended to support teachers in addressing the specific population at Urban High. Other recommendations included offering extracurricular activities and afterschool programming in addition to creating additional alternatives for students who continue to struggle in the program.
Chapter Five:

Discussion of Research Findings

In his State of the Union Address on February 24, 2009, President Obama pronounced his goal that all Americans would have committed to at least one year of higher education or career training by 2020. He pledged that America would once again have the highest proportion of college graduates in the world. In order to achieve this goal, the country would first need to address its unacceptable graduation rate (Obama, 2009). In March 2010, America’s Promise Alliance, supported by General Colin Powell, launched its Grad Nation campaign with the plan of increasing the high school graduation rate to 90% by 2020 to reach the President’s goals and strengthen the nation (American’s Promise Alliance, 2010).

Graduation rates are significantly lower in urban school districts than in suburban school districts. The Cities in Crisis report (2008), found just over one-half of students (53%) in the country’s 50 largest cities complete high school with a diploma (American Promise Alliance, 2008). Urban districts have a graduation rate of 61% compared to the national graduation rate of about 71% (Swanson, 2008). Decreasing dropout rates and increasing graduation rates continue to be challenges in urban districts. Urban districts across the country need to identify interventions and best practices that can increase graduation rates. One strategy used by urban districts is to create alternative pathways to graduation by addressing specific needs of students who have not been successful in mainstream settings. An example of one of these alternative pathways in the Clear Water Public School District is Urban High School, which has been instrumental to students who were on the pathway to dropout.

This study examined Urban High by gathering data from students, parents, and staff who have experienced the alternative pathway. This chapter presents the program evaluation’s
summary of findings of Urban High, which aimed to answer empirical research questions. This qualitative study answered the following questions:

1. How do students experience Urban High School?
2. How has the new alternative program implemented in the Clear Water Public School District impacted students’ grades, attendance, behavior, and overall school performance?
3. How does the design and implementation of Urban High School compare to the criteria of effective practices established through a review of the literature?
4. How do the practices used at Urban High School address educational equality and equity?

This chapter will present important conclusions drawn from the literature review and theoretical frameworks, as well as data presented in Chapter Four. It will then move on to provide a discussion of implications for action, while transferring what has been learned to other educational settings. The chapter will discuss the interventions and strategies that have been supportive to students who experience challenges and obstacles that have made it difficult for them to succeed in mainstream settings. Lastly, the chapter will discuss recommendations for the program and for further research.

**Purpose of Study**

The purpose of this qualitative study was to evaluate an alternative program in Clear Water Public School District, which services students who were on the path to dropping out of school. Clear Water’s current dropout rate is 8.4% compared to Massachusetts’s rate of 2.9% in 2009-2010 (MA DESE, 2010). While Clear Water School District’s graduation rate is only 53.5% (MA DESE, 2010), it has legal responsibility to educate all students. Consequently, Urban
High was established to service students who were being excluded from neighborhood schools in the district.

Since its creation in August of 2008, Urban High has utilized strategies and interventions to address many risk factors and student needs with the goal of helping students overcome obstacles and eventually graduate. This study identified, documented, and discussed specific strategies and interventions that have been helpful to students who were not successful in their neighborhood schools. It also identified participants’ concerns and feelings about the program’s weak areas that may require improvement. The study compared Urban High practices and interventions to what other successful alternative programs are doing in the country and analyzed whether these practices addressed the specific challenges of students and provided an equitable education. This chapter will discuss what students have found to have positively impact their feelings about school and what has helped them engage more successfully in their academics. This chapter will discuss specific themes, such as student engagement, characteristics, attributes, and skills required by teachers, as well as specific program structures and interventions that contributed to student success. The goal of this study is to provide the Clear Water Public School district with helpful information to continue to improve programming for at-risk youth.

The study relied on the specific perceptions and experiences of students, staff, and parents of Urban High. This strategy was appropriate for an evaluation study, which is, as Mertens (2005) explains, “designed to provide an in-depth description of a specific program, practice, or setting” (p. 229). This research approach (Mertens, 2005) allowed for an in-depth inquiry into the “personal experience and introspection that described meaning in the individuals’ lives” and how they experienced the alternative school (p. 230). Primary qualitative
sources of data included student interviews, student connection surveys, staff interviews, staff questionnaires, parent interviews, and a student focus group—all qualitative research methods.

The theoretical lenses used during this study were Program Theory and Critical Theory. According to Creswell (2009), qualitative methods are helpful in studies that use these theoretical frameworks because it allows for an “inter-subjective” understanding, as well as an opportunity to understand complex issues experienced by the study’s participants. Using these methods, I was able to analyze the participants’ individual stories and their experiences at the school.

This chapter will answer the research questions in addition to highlight participants’ beliefs of what influenced their individual and collective successes at Urban High.

**Research Question One: How do students experience Urban High School?**

Prior to attending Urban High, students in the study had not been successful in the mainstream setting. Their failing grades, poor attendance, and maladaptive behaviors led them to Urban High. Once they began attending, they became more engaged, attended school regularly, and experienced academic success. Students described specific reasons for their change in attitudes toward school. The major themes identified by students and parents were the small school and class sizes, relationships with teachers, and a heightened level of supervision, which made students feel safe and deterred them from making bad decisions. These factors increased their engagement and changed their attitudes about school. Students and their parents wanted to remain at Urban High and believed that if they returned to their previous setting, they would not be successful.

**Small school and class size.** Students and other participants emphasized that the small school size of Urban High had a positive influence on their academic experiences. Studies of
alternative schools have reinforced the idea that small size increases learning opportunities and student engagement, addresses issues that cannot be addressed in mainstream settings, and allows for one-on-one interaction between students and teachers (Barr, 1981; Bryk & Thum, 1989; Lange & Sletten, 2002; Morley, 1991; Young, 1990). Small class size and low teacher-to-student ratios (10:1) were identified as characteristics of effective alternative programs (Schargel & Smirk, 2001). The number of students at Urban High was significantly lower than in the district’s mainstream high school and middle schools. At the time of the study, the mainstream high school had 2,855 students compared to the 65 students at Urban High. The students and staff believed the small size of the school allowed them to develop relationships and created opportunities to for more individualized attention. Students reported that because of the small class size, teachers were able to reach out to them and help them with both their academic and emotional needs. They were able to learn without the distractions and negative influences that they had experienced in their previous, large-sized classrooms and schools. Students indicated that the small school size provided opportunities to develop positive relationships with teachers who cared about them. Their feelings about teachers at Urban High increased their level of academic engagement and changed their attitudes about school.

**Relationships with teachers who cared.** Students and parents reported that they felt the relationships that teachers developed with students at Urban High positively impacted students’ academics experiences in ways that the students had not experienced before. Students felt that teachers at Urban High genuinely cared about them, and they trusted staff to help them if they were having personal problems. As Ellen, a student in this study described, “It’s like the teachers take the time to talk to kids. If they see me come to school and I am not talking to anyone they will pull me aside and ask, “Is everything okay?” They know when something is wrong. The
teachers here care” (Interview 1). Examinations of the National Education Longitudinal Study of 1988 (NELS:88), which collected data from students in high school, established that students who are at risk of dropping out of high school are more likely to perform well if they believe that their teachers care about them (Muller, 2001).

In the study at Urban High, students’ positive relationships with teachers and their feelings about their teachers impacted their overall academic success. Teachers created positive classroom environments, which is a factor known to increase motivation and improve students’ attitudes toward schools (Fraser & Fisher, 1982; LaRocque, 2008; Schargel & Smirk, 2001). Students at Urban High reported that their motivation and efforts increased because teachers took the time to work with them individually. The classroom climate was significantly different than in their previous settings. They were able to take risks and felt comfortable asking for help when they needed it. Additional research has also shown that when students perceive their school to have a cohesive and unified school climate, they will be more successful (Stewart, 2007). This research was echoed by students at Urban High who reported that the small school of caring teachers made them feel like they were part of a family. As Calli stated, “They are like a family. Like it’s a small school and the teachers really care about you” (Interview 6). All student participants reported that they felt staff were invested and took the time to get to know students individually, which impacted their success.

**Supervision and Safety.** The level of supervision at Urban High provided students with more than one benefit. It made them feel safe, and it deterred students from making bad decisions throughout the day. Participants indicated in the interviews and surveys that they felt safer at Urban High than they had in other school settings. Protocols, such as the alarmed doors and the metal detector that every student had to go through before entering the building, provided
students with a sense of security they did not feel in their previous settings. Research has also indicated that students who feel safe in school have an increased rate of academic success and are more likely to plan for college (Clarke & Russell, 2009). Students reported that the metal detector both made them feel safe from others bringing in dangerous items and deterred them from bringing in dangerous items themselves.

Students also appreciated the amount of supervision that they experienced at Urban High. This supervision provided students with a more learning-conducive classroom environment, which allowed them to focus on their academics. It also made it difficult for them to skip school or classes. Research supports the claim that increased supervision in school, which ensures students attend classes, improves students’ chances of staying in school (Bridgeland et al., 2006). Students also reported that the level of supervision improved their school attendance and participation. Studies have shown that students are more likely to skip school or cut class if they believe that the classroom environment is chaotic or if there are no academic consequences for skipping class (Duckworth & DeJung, 1989). Students reported that supervision deterred them from skipping class, as well as prevented them from acting inappropriately in the classroom because they knew they would “get caught.” One student, Richard, shared, “They don’t let the kids walk around the hallways, jump around in the classrooms” (Interview 6). Many students in the study also believed that if Urban High did not have the level of supervision it did, students would relapse into making the same bad decisions that they had made prior to attending.

Research Question Two: How as the new alternative program implemented in the Clear Water Public School District impacted students’ grades, attendance, behavior, and overall school performance?
Urban High had a positive impact on student grades, attendance, behavior, and overall academic success. It was important to consider these impact because dropout risk factors include histories of absenteeism, grade retention, and poor academic success (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Lee & Burkam, 2000). Most students and their parents reported improvement in all three areas of grades, attendance, and behavior, with two participants reporting improvements in at least two out of the three areas. Schools do not have control over risk factors such as poverty, race, gender, and family circumstances (Lee & Burkam, 2000). However, as demonstrated by the participants in the study, the Urban High program provided interventions for risk factors such as absenteeism, grade retention, truancy, and low academic performance. In the case of Urban High, the improvements in students’ attendance, behaviors, and attitudes about school led to an overall improvement in grades and overall academic progress. These improvements came down to three factors: an increased desire to attend school, behavioral support, and a strong and positive connections to staff.

**Desire to attend school.** Truancy is one of the early warning signs of students who are going down the path of academic disengagement and educational failure through suspension, expulsion, or dropout (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Rumberger, 2001). Students and parents reported significant improvement in the student’s attendance at Urban High. They attributed the improvement in attendance to an increased desire to attend school, in addition to feeling more successful in school. Urban High addressed school attendance by implementing specific interventions to address students who were truant and promoting awareness of the importance of attending school. According to the literature, schools can improve attendance by expressing the importance of attendance and by making students feel significant (Epstein & Sheldon, 2002). Students identified specific interventions, such as getting daily phone calls if they were out, and
having the attendance officer go to their house and “pulling them out of bed” as helpful to their attendance. Students also reported that the decline in infractions that led to suspensions also improved attendance.

**Behavioral supports.** Students’ behaviors improved while they attended Urban High. Students reported a significant reduction in “conduct cards” as well as suspensions since attending the school. Students believed that since attending Urban High they had better attitudes, were more respectful toward others, and cared more about their actions. Students reported that their relationships with staff, the level of supervision, and behavior interventions all had a positive impact on their behavior. Research has shown that urban schools require more intensive support to address student problem behaviors (Turnbull et al., 2002). Urban High utilizes a behavior system that positively reinforces specific behaviors and provides students with alternatives to suspensions and strategies for students to use before their behaviors escalate. As students’ attendance and behavior improved, so did their engagement to their academics, which, subsequently, had a positive impact on their grades.

**Staff are important.** The importance of staff and the positive impacts they had on students at Urban High surfaced throughout the study. Students and their parents believed that the type of staff at the school was a major reason that students were successful. However, staff in the study made it clear that their jobs at Urban High were complex and at times very challenging. Staff who worked at the program required specialized skills and personalities. They reported the need to be proficient in more than just academics, including some training and experience in behavior management. It is important for alternative schools to have staff that have attributes that include patience, commitment, flexibility, and who have the ability to function in stressful
environments (Kellmayer, 1998). Urban High staff and students also identified these characteristics as important.

Staff believed that the most important characteristic required by staff at Urban High was the desire to work with a population that presented obstacles. This often proved difficult for staff because the students at the program had a history of acting out towards the adults in their lives. Staff reported that it was important not to take these incidents personally. Staff at Urban High needed to understand that students required adults in their lives that would work with them and not give up on them, as many adults had done in the past (Raffini, 1993).

Students who came to Urban High had a different educational experience when compared to their previous school experiences. The small school size allowed for a nurturing and supportive environment that helped students engage in their academics. Additional supervision at the school made students feel safe and deterred them from making bad decisions. The type of staff and school climate influenced their desire to attend school, which had a positive impact on their grades. Students and parents genuinely believed that the staff cared for students and demonstrated this care through their patience and flexibility. Staff provided students with both emotional and academic support. Their high expectations gave students new and positive perspectives on their education and futures.

**Research Question Three: How does the design and implementation of Urban High School compare to the criteria of effective practices established through a review of the literature?**

In a program evaluation, it is important to understand the “theoretical premises on which the program was based” (Weiss, 1998). In the case of Urban High these premises include the structure of interventions, strategies, and the impacts of each on the participants in the study.
Urban High’s program theory was explained in the literature review chapter; however, this chapter will discuss relevant aspects of the school’s program theory related to the study.

The literature review and findings of this study showed practices used at Urban High were similar to those used in other successful alternative programs. It should be noted that the interventions used were also found to reduce dropouts. In order to make comparisons, it is important to understand what types of alternative schools Urban High resembled.

**Alternative schools.** Two alternative school structures share similar characteristics with Urban High, one described by Hefner-Packer (1991) and another type described by Raywid (1994). Urban High falls under Hefner-Packer’s (1991) third type of alternative school – *Separate Alternative Schools*. These schools are separated from mainstream schools and have different academic and social adjustment programs. Urban High is located in a different building from the comprehensive schools and was designed to provide interventions that do not exist in the student’s school of origin. Urban High also appeared to be a combination of Raywid’s (1994) Type II and Type III categories of schools – *Last Chance School* and *Remedial School*. Urban High program is the “last chance” for students who would otherwise be excluded or expelled from their neighborhood schools. Urban High becomes, in most cases, a student’s only option for a pathway to graduation. It also provides students with interventions and “remedies” to the existing risk factors that are obstacles to their academic success. Urban High provides students an educational option that is different from the mainstream school and more appropriate for their specific needs. Students and their parents reported that Urban High had positively impacted their overall academic success by providing interventions and options that were not available in their previous settings.
Urban High reduces the number of students who drop out. Students, teachers, and parents at Urban High all identified the elements of small school size, small class size, committed staff, and positive thoughts and feelings about the program as having positive impacts on student success (Ancess & Wichterle, 2001). Urban High, as described by students, staff, and parents, shared many of the characteristics of successful alternative schools according to a five year in-depth longitudinal study conducted by North Carolina Public Schools (2001). As reported earlier, Urban High possessed caring and committed staff, a family-like atmosphere of respect, low teacher/student ratio allowing more individual attention, individualized and personalized learning, and services and interventions to address emotional and academic needs (North Carolina Public Schools, 2001). Participants also identified additional characteristics in the literature such as creative strategies for course offerings, strong community, strategies that were effective in reducing truancy, programs to help students make up high school credits, and reducing behavior problems in students in alternative schools (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Schargel & Smirk, 2004).

**Student needs.** Students who attend Urban High receive extra supports to address their specific needs. Raywid (2001) also reported that alternative schools were “the prospective solution to a variety of the nation’s ills” (p. 192). Students who attend Urban High were not successful in mainstream settings and came to the school with significant histories, obstacles, and maladaptive behaviors that had negatively impacted their lives. According to Urban High’s program theory, interventions, such as individual and group counseling, anger management and substance abuse groups, drug testing, mentoring, and credit recovery, were implemented to address specific needs, such as poor attendance, failing grades, negative school attitudes, gaps in learning, inappropriate behaviors, insufficient credits, and lack of educational goals. Additional
services and supports that surfaced in the study included a behavior system; closely monitored attendance, which included wake up calls and home visits; close relationships with courts and probation; college pathway exposure; parent engagement contracts; individual and group counseling; extra academic support; and a positive and safe environment. (Appendix N)

Urban High welcomes students who present with complex issues that differ from student to student. Along with their complex risk factors, students who attend Urban High have long histories of negative school experiences that impact their attitudes, motivation, effort, and behaviors. Students are assessed at intake by a licensed therapist, and referrals are put in place immediately to address any substance abuse, clinical, or academic issues the student may be having. Participants also highlighted program components such as clinical and substance abuse treatment, behavioral interventions, collateral collaboration, and credit recovery.

**Clinical and substance abuse interventions.** In order to address social and emotional needs identified during intake, students are offered individual and group counseling, an approach that is discussed in the literature of effective alternative schools (Hughes et al., 2006). Counseling services at Urban High addressed risk factors such as substance abuse and other emotional issues that manifest as inappropriate behaviors. Providing students emotional support has been identified as an effective practice in alternative settings (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2001). Student participants also discussed the drug testing at the program, specifically how it had motivated them to work on their issues of substance abuse. Parents reported they were “grateful” about the access and support they received through these services, which made a difference for their children. As one parent noted, “The counseling, the services are great. This is the first time a school helped me” (Interview 8). Referrals are also made for family counseling, mentoring services, and probation issues.
Behavior interventions. Leone & Drakeford (1999) suggested that “alternative education programs have been developed for students whose behaviors disrupt the learning of others and otherwise interfere with the order of the school environment” (p. 86). Inappropriate behaviors are one of the main reasons students attend Urban High. Students in the study reported that they had difficulty dealing with their anger and frustration, which would lead them to be verbally and physically aggressive toward others. As one student stated, “I have anger issues, and I have an attitude, and I don’t know why. I know the littlest things tick me off” (Interview 6). Studies have shown that students who have issues with violent behavior and substance abuse are at risk of dropping out of school (Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986). As a result, all students who attend Urban High are put on a behavior system that reinforces appropriate behaviors. The behavior system is utilized throughout the day, as students travel from class to class. As they earn points toward their individual daily percentage goal for appropriate behavior, they move up levels and gain additional privileges.

Students in the study talked about the usefulness of being able to utilize a classroom, that the behavioral specialist provided when they needed it, because it enabled them to calm down and complete their schoolwork separately from the other students. This prevented them from escalating and provided them with an option besides “getting kicked out of class” when they were frustrated or angry about something. Instead of being suspended, students were required to “process” inappropriate behaviors, check in with the behavioral therapist, and, if possible, speak with the classroom teacher before they returned to their scheduled class. Behavior interventions at Urban High have decreased the need for suspensions, which are known to impact student attendance and lead to further disengagement (Ekstrom et al., 1986; Wehlage & Rutter, 1986).
Collateral connections. Staff reported that comprehensive student support included contact between outside providers and school personnel. These contacts include collaterals of students when they entered, or collaterals that were put in place since they attended, a practice shared by many successful alternative programs. As of 2008, 80% of school districts with alternative schools reported working with the criminal justice system and/or with community mental health agencies (Carver & Lewis, 2010). The ongoing collaboration with outside mental health providers is helpful to ensure communication and continuation of services.

Research Question Four: How do the practices used at Urban High School address educational equality and equity?

The terms “educational equality” and “educational equity” are relative concepts, but are ethical terms based on a federally mandated right to an education that all Americans possess. Fairness or “getting the same” is often equated with equality. Equity, on the other hand, means accommodating and meeting the specific needs of specific individuals. As explicated by the National Council of Teachers of Mathematics (2000), “Equity does not mean that every student should receive identical instruction; instead, it demands that reasonable and appropriate accommodations be made as needed to promote access and attainment for all students” (p. 1).

Students at Urban High come have low socio-economic statuses and face challenges and obstacles that create barriers in their lives. Using the lens of Critical Theory was also important to consider because Urban High is servicing students who have not been successful and need the program to help them become successful.

Educational equity requires changes in education policy, reviewing classroom practices and reviewing how resources are allocated (Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, 2007). It was important to look at equity in this study to ensure that students were
receiving an adequate education that prepared them for their futures and helped them overcome individual barriers and obstacles. Studies have found that some alternative programs can lack rigor and do not focus on long-term results (Cox et. al., 1995). Similarly, Barr (1981) argued that “alternative schools represent some of the most unfortunate tendencies toward social tracking, political manipulation, and educational hucksterism” (p. 571). To examine if Urban High addressed educational equity and equality, participants were asked about opportunities to work on risk factors that put them at a disadvantage, such as retention (Alexander et al., 2001), the level of rigor in their classes (Hoye, 2005), the belief and value systems shared by staff (Bamburg, 1994; Raffini, 1993), and development of future goals (Kim & Taylor, 2007).

**Credit recovery.** Poor academic performance, failing courses, and retention are predictors of dropout (Alexander et al., 2001; Battin-Pearson et al., 2000; Rumberger, 2001). Consequently, Urban High offers credit recovery as an intervention that helps students earn lost credits. This intervention was identified as a positive option that helped students who were disengaged and years behind their peers. Many of the students over 16 come to Urban High missing credits because of their histories of poor attendance or poor academic achievement. Credit recovery allows students to work on the risk factor of retention and helps students “catch up” to their peers. These opportunities included taking extra classes after school, utilizing computer courses, and providing students opportunities throughout the school day to earn credits.

**Belief in students and high expectations.** High Expectations are needed for educational equity (National Council of Teachers of Mathematics, 2000), and having school staff with high expectations of student achievement is a characteristic of effective alternative schools (Schargel & Smink, 2001). Research also shows that when students feel that teachers and other adults hold high expectations for them, they are likely to do better in school (Catalano et al., 2004). Students
in the study felt that teachers at Urban High believed in their success and held high expectations for them. However, believing in students’ success was not always shared by everyone in the district. As one staff explained, “Some people believe that because of the school they were associated with, because of the town or the neighborhood they live in, because of their socio-economic status, people feel as though they will never make it” (Interview 12). Research has also discussed the perception of students who attend alternative programs with labels such as “expelled, delinquent, disruptive, dangerous to others,” etc. (Fulkerson, Harrison, & Beebe, 1997). However, it was evident that, through their experiences at the program, parents, students, and staff believed that staff at Urban High genuinely believed in the success of the students.

Staff reported that they faced the challenge of getting students to believe in themselves. Research shows that students with poor self-esteem think, feel, and behave in ways that hinder them in reaching goals and have low aspirations that produce unsuccessful academic performances (Margolis & MaCabe, 2006). According to participants in the study, when initially entering the program, students at Urban High had limited perceptions of future opportunities and possibilities. Their visions of the future were sometimes limited to the city they lived in and did not always include possibilities that ventured outside their inner-city neighborhoods. As described by a student who had recently graduated from Urban High, “A lot of these kids think that this is it, this is their world. They are going to stay in Clear Water and not leave it. There is a whole big world and there is so much you can do in life. A lot of these kids are trapped here” (Interview 2).

Staff reported that getting students to believe in themselves took endurance and commitment. It required staff to hold students to high expectations and create opportunities for success throughout the day. Two out of the three staff interviewed indicated they knew of staff
who would “give in” to avoid confrontations with students. In one of the questionnaires received in the study, a participant noted that a negative aspect of the program was that some staff had “unrealistic expectations for students,” which supported this point. Balancing high expectations and student needs was something that may need additional attention at the program. Even though it was reported that all staff had good intentions, providing students with minimal standards could be counterproductive to getting students to the levels of success they deserve.

**College and postsecondary plans.** A Critical Theory perspective allowed me to focus on whether or not Urban High “is beneficial to students when it provides content, processes, rigor, and concepts that they need to develop and realize their future goals” (Kim & Taylor, 2007, p. 208). Students believed that the individual attention they received at Urban High made the schoolwork manageable, whereas, in the past they did not learn the material and had failed classes. Students and parents reported that academic success at Urban High impacted their perspectives and plans for the future. Their new attitudes and desire to attend school transferred into new desires to plan for postsecondary opportunities. All participants reported that college was something they were working towards, since entering Urban High. According to participants, Urban High created a vision that students did not have before entering the school: “Before I came here, I was never going to go to college. I was going to quit school” (Interview 1). Students provided specific examples of steps they had taken in their college application process. All the students in the study emphasized the push at Urban High to consider and look into colleges. Opportunities included college tours, creating college binders, researching their specific interests, and investigating colleges that offered specific majors. Parents in the study acknowledged that they appreciated Urban High’s focus on college because prior to their child attending, their only goal was getting their child to reach graduation. College was not something
they had considered because of the level of difficulty their child was having. As one parent expressed, “He is still in school. He is 18 and he could have signed himself out but he hasn’t. He talks about going to college. If he was still at Clear Water, he would have been long gone (Interview 9).

**Summary of Findings**

The discussion above shows how the current study reflects the literature about alternative education and how such programs can mitigate, and in some cases not mitigate, the risk of dropout for high-risk students. The primary themes that emerged from the literature of effective alternative programs include small school and class size, caring relationships with teachers, high expectations, access to services and interventions, and close supervision that helps students feel safe. This study confirms those themes. In addition, it also suggests that, for the participants at this particular school, Urban High positively impacted their attendance, overall academic performance, and helped them focus on future goals. Students in this study attributed most of their success to the interactions they had with staff and the commitment staff showed them. Ultimately, this study confirms that the work that is happening at Urban High is supporting students who might otherwise be “long gone.” These findings have implications for practice, more broadly, and suggest possible next steps for Urban High.

**Practitioner Significance**

There are approximately 10,300 alternative schools and programs currently in operation that are designed to reach students who are at risk of dropout (NCES, 2012). However, there is limited research on individual alternative schools. Most research consists of national surveys and reports that have relied on districts across the country to fill out questionnaires to gather their data. Other studies collect statistical information and create reports about the histories and
differing contexts of alternative schools (Lange & Sletten, 2001). The current literature does not appear to contain many program evaluations of alternative programs that focus on student experiences and perspectives. This study addresses this gap in the literature by qualitatively evaluating the alternative setting of a specific program, Urban High. It also contributes to research related to early implementation stages of alternative programs from the perspective of program participants. Students, parents, and staff provided the data for this qualitative study.

**Recommendations for Program**

This evaluation will be helpful to current program leaders of Urban High. It can help reinforce current practices as effective and suggest areas in need of improvement. As discussed earlier in this chapter, small school/class size, caring faculty, close supervision, a safe school climate, interventions that support emotional and academic needs, and high expectations have all been demonstrated as positive characteristics of the Urban High in this study. These practices and interventions have all been supported by the literature as effective practices in alternative schools (Barr, 1981; Bryk & Thum, 1989; National Dropout Prevention Center, 2001; Public Schools of North Carolina, 2001; Raywid, 1989; Schargel & Smink, 2001). Findings of this study were specific to Urban High because it relied on participants at the program to describe their specific experiences, thoughts, and feelings of the school. Participants in the study also offered thoughts and experiences that may provide insight for potential changes and improvements for the program. Many of these thoughts were also supported by the literature. These recommendations included creating additional alternatives for students, maintaining class and school size, ensuring all staff had high expectations for all students, and providing specialized professional development for staff.
**Additional alternatives.** Some students in the focus group and individual interviews made reference to other students who were negatively impacting the school climate. Staff questionnaires and interviews also identified some students “not responding to interventions that were provided” and who continued to have behavioral difficulties, even after attending Urban High. As research has shown “one size does not fit all,” and there should be a number of different programs for different students in alternative settings (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2001). It is important to continue to assess program components at Urban High and ensure that students who are not responding to interventions are not distracting others from making academic progress. Providing other “alternatives,” such as online courses, modified schedules, or tutoring, have been considered effective practices and may be needed for students who are not responding to program interventions (Public Schools of North Carolina, 2001; Schargel & Smink, 2001). It is important to have ongoing communication with district administration to ensure other creative alternative programming for students are considered.

**Maintain small school and class size.** The literature and participants in this study stressed that class size significantly impacts student success. Research consistently shows that large schools can contribute to student alienation and dropout (Bryk & Thum, 1989; Wehlage et al., 1989). A 2007 National Dropout Prevention Center study identified most of the dropouts in the United States come from high schools termed urban “dropout factories” with student enrollments of 2,000 or more (Balfanz & Legters, 2004). Clear Water Public Schools is an urban district with a high school enrollment of over 2,000 students. Clear Water is on the right track by creating alternative pathways, such as Urban High, but it needs to maintain small class size as a priority.
Currently, there is no protocol that maintains a small class size at Urban High. As reported by staff participants in this study, behavior management is feasible because of the current small class sizes. Research of effective alternative programs has recommended a teacher to student ratio of no more than 10:1 (Schargel & Smink, 2001). Students who are sent to the program have complex issues that require additional individual attention. As presented in the study and in the research, classrooms need to remain small and manageable to allow for teacher and student relationships to form.

**High expectations.** Research, including this study, acknowledges that high expectations are important. Staff need to balance their compassion for students with a genuine belief that they can overcome obstacles and become successful. They need to refrain from minimizing expectations because they “feel bad” for students. Teachers need to be conscious of their attitudes and practices to ensure they are not encouraging low academic and behavioral expectations. Urban children often are victims of stereotypes or labels, which can communicate and foster teachers’ low expectations (Heyman & Vigil, 2008). Urban high is the last opportunity for these students to receive an education. As described earlier, many of these students lack the self-confidence, motivation, and belief that they can be successful. It is important that the staff at Urban High realize they have a responsibility in assuring these students that they can be successful.

**Specialized Professional Development.** Professional development at Urban High should be ongoing and specialized. Researchers believe that effective alternative schools need to provide ongoing training and support for teachers (National Dropout Prevention Center, 2007). The challenges that students at Urban High have are complex and require a group of professionals who are prepared to work with these issues. According to participants in this study,
the staff at the program was a significant factor in student success. Supporting the staff at the program will continue to facilitate student progress. Providing staff with professional development in the areas of classroom management, instructional strategies, diversity, and risk factor awareness—to name a few—may be helpful. Staff need to be appropriate, healthy individuals who understand the population and are not only highly qualified in their subject areas, but also have an understanding of how they can continue to have a positive impact on students.

**Recommendation for Further Research**

Resiliency is evident in the students who participated in this study. They have responded to effective practices at Urban High and are being successful, despite the obstacles they face by living in an urban community. However, not all students are experiencing success. There were some students at Urban High who never returned their consent forms, or, during the duration of the study, were “locked up” or even dropped out. Why is it that those students have not been resilient and are not responding to the “effective practices” in this study? In order to help students move toward resiliency, educators must use strategies that focus on instructional practices, policies, and attitudes.

Another factor that emerged from this study was that school size significantly impacted students’ success at Urban High. During a time when decreasing resources are impacting school budgets, school districts are considering the consolidation of schools. The belief is that budgets can be reduced when buildings are sharing resources. Money is being put into building bigger schools that can house many more students instead of maintaining smaller schools that service fewer students. The larger settings make it difficult to identify students who are struggling and who may need more individualized support. However, as we move away from small schools,
relationships will be harder to create. As long as students in urban communities continued to face poverty, substance abuse, gangs, and violence, schools need to be more than just places of academic education. Students in these communities need supports and services that are adaptable to their needs. Research could focus on whether small schools can be more effective in providing students with what they need. As districts continue to look at budgets cuts, further research is needed to inform stakeholders about making the best decisions for students.

Summary

Since its creation in August of 2008, Urban High has serviced the Clear Water Public School’s most challenging population. Many of the students have been excluded because they had been deemed a safety concern for other students in their mainstream schools, while others had been recruited because of their failing grades, poor attendance, and chronic history of inappropriate behaviors. Urban High was founded on the dual beliefs that every child can learn and every child is entitled to an education. According to Urban High’s program theory, the school has utilized strategies and interventions to address many risk factors and student needs, with the goal of helping students overcome obstacles and eventually graduate from high school. Structures such as having small school and class size, committed staff, and risk factor interventions were characteristics of effective practices at Urban High and in the literature. Participants reported that they experienced caring teachers who provided them with emotional and academic support, as well as supervision and behavioral interventions. Urban High addressed students’ individual needs by assessing them at intake, identifying any emotional issues that may require support. Clinical and substance abuse treatment, behavioral interventions, creating and maintaining collateral contacts, and credit recovery options were all strategies and
interventions that the literature identified as effective with alternative schools. These additional supports helped participants in the study experience academic success.

According to the lens of Critical Theory, Urban High does attempt to address educational equality and equity. Because of the differences in sizes, Urban High does not provide as many course selections as Clear Water High but does offer students the courses they need for graduation. Many of the students who come to school are behind in credits. These students are provided several opportunities to make up those classes. Students are also offered additional supports that they did not have access to at the mainstream school. Participants in the study reported that they believed that staff had high expectations and genuinely believed in students’ success. Students at Urban High are also offered access to learning and planning for college, including participating in college tours.

The study also documented potential improvements reported by participants. One recommendation that surfaced during the study was maintaining small class size. Maintaining small class size would allow staff to continue making connections with students, as well as provide them with individualized emotional and academic support. Another recommendation that surfaced was continuing to provide additional alternatives for students who do not respond to the program structure and interventions. This is important for both the students and the staff. Students who are not responding to the program’s structure and interventions distract other students who are making progress and consume limited program resources. These alternatives can include flexible schedules, online learning, and tutoring. Another recommendation from the study was ensuring that staff who worked at Urban High held high expectations and genuinely believed in the success of students at Urban High. The final recommendation was providing ongoing specialized professional development to support staff who serviced students with
existing challenges and obstacles. Specialized professional development topics would range from instructional strategies to mental, social, and emotional health.
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A blueprint for school wide positive behavior support: Implementation of three


to postsecondary education: K-12 intervention programs for underrepresented youth
(NCES 2001-2005)*. Washington, DC: prepared by Patricia Gándara with the assistance
of Deborah Bial for the National Postsecondary Education Cooperative Access Working
Group.

*Characteristics of the 100 largest public elementary and secondary school districts in the


Notification of IRB Action

Date: May 25, 2011
IRB #: 11-04-27
Principal Investigator(s):
Angela Bermudez
Paula Manchester
Department:
College of Professional Studies/Education
Address:
50 Nightingale Hall
Northeastern University
Title of Project:
Evaluating an Alternative Pathway Addressing Dropout
Participating Sites:
New Bedford Public Schools – approval received
Informed Consent:
One (1) signed consent for Parents, One (1) signed consent for Students with verbal assent and One (1) signed consent for staff
DHHS Review Category:
Expedited #6, #7
Monitoring Interval:
12 months

Approval Expiration Date: MAY 24, 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
NOTIFICATION OF IRB ACTION
RENEWAL APPROVAL

Date: April 24, 2012
Principal Investigator(s): Jane S. Lohmann
Paula Manchester
Department: Doctor of Education Program
College of Professional Studies
Address: 42 Belvidere
Northeastern University
Title of Project: Evaluating an Alternative Pathway Addressing Dropout
Approval Status: Closed to Enrollment – Ongoing Analysis Only
Participating Sites: School site permission letter on file
Original Protocol Approved: May 25, 2011
Most Recent Approval Date: July 6, 2011 - modification
DHHS Review Category: Expedited #6, #7
Informed Consents: N/A
Monitoring Interval: 12 months

APPROVAL EXPIRATION DATE: APRIL 23, 2013

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
April 12, 2011

Nan C. Regina, Director
Human Subject Research Protection
960 Renaissance Park
Northeastern University
Boston, MA 02115-50000

Dear Mr. Regina:

I hereby grant permission for Ms. Paula Manchester, Northeastern Doctoral Student, to conduct a research process evaluation study at Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School. From my understanding, the formative assessment project seeks to evaluate the implementation and results of the Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School, one of the current dropout prevention strategies that are being used in the New Bedford District.

The study will include a student connection survey, individual student interviews, a student focus group, staff questionnaire, individual staff interviews, parent interviews, and student and program data. Individuals who participate in this study will be confidential and voluntary. Parents, students, and staff will be informed of the study and will be required to sign an informed consent before participating in the study. Any program data or student data will also be confidential.

Sincerely,

Dr. Mary Louise Francis
Superintendent
Dear [Name],

Hello. My name is Paula Manchester. I am the principal of Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School. I am also a doctoral student at Northeastern University and I am in the process of completing my dissertation: *Evaluating an Alternative Pathway Addressing Dropout*. In this project, I am going to examine our school, the work we do with our students, and in what ways the school helps students learn and overcome the obstacles that have led students to our school. We would like to understand if what we are doing here at Whaling City Jr. Sr. High is working, and whether we need to make any changes to improve it.

You are being asked to participate in this study because as a parent, student or staff member of the school, you may have valuable information to contribute to this project. Your feelings, experiences and thoughts about Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School are important.

Attached to this letter, you will find two consent forms. These forms that follow will explain in detail what the study is about. It also explains that you can choose to participate or not. Everything you say will be handled in a confidential manner.

If you agree to participate in the study, please do the following: a) if you are a parent and are interested in participating, please sign the informed consent form. b) if your child is under 18 years of age and would like them to participate, please sign their consent form, which will allow them to participate. Once the consent form(s) has been signed, please give it/them to your child to return it to school.

If you are a staff member, I have placed this notice and consent form in your mailbox. If you are interested in participating, please sign and place in my mailbox.

Please note that the information you provide will be confidential and there are no consequences associated with your decision to participate to this study.

Thank You,

Paula Manchester

Doctoral Student, Northeastern University
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies
Investigator: Paula Manchester
Title of Project: Evaluating an Alternative Pathway

Verbal Description of Project and Clarification of Participation to Students

Points to make to students before participation:

- You are invited to take part in a research study that is being conducted here at Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School.
- The study will be evaluating the school by getting feedback from the students, parents, and staff who are here.
- Everyone is being asked to participate in some way or another. However, participation is voluntary and you do not have to participate if you do not want to.
- I would like for you to participate because your input is very important because it will give you an opportunity to let me know what you think about the school. Some of the questions will focus on asking you what you like about the program and what you don’t like.
- It will also ask how you think you have done since coming to our school.
- Your responses will be confidential and if you do not decide to participate, it won’t have any effect on your grades, etc. at the school.
- Your parents have also been informed about the study and have given their permission to have you participate.
- Once again, you do not have to participate. If you are not interested, let me know directly that you do not want to participate. I will not be upset with you or you will not be penalized in any way.
- Any student who is not interested in participating will not be given a survey or will not be interviewed.
- Please feel free to ask me any questions about participating.
- Thank you for your support in this project which may help to make our school better.
Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies  
Investigator: Paula Manchester  
Title of Project: Evaluating an Alternative Pathway  

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Student Survey/Interview/Focus Group Participant  

You are invited to take part in a research study that is being conducted within Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.  

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

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a student of Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School.  

Why is this research study being done?  

This research project seeks to evaluate Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School, a current dropout prevention strategy that is being used in the New Bedford district. This study will describe strategies and interventions used, as well as analyze how they are impacting students' lives. It will also compare practices and interventions utilized at Whaling City Jr. Sr. High to effective practices used in alternative settings that serve our at-risk population of students.  

What will I be asked to do?  

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask to do one, two, or all of the following.  

- You will be asked to participate in the CPS (Chicago Public Schools) Student Connection Survey. Student Connection Survey reports information about student perceptions of safety, educational expectations, school support, and social and emotional skills, all of which have been shown to be necessary conditions for learning. There will be 48 questions.  
- Interview – You will be interviewed asking questions with regard to your experience at Whaling City Jr. Sr. High. Students who have been attending the program at least 6 months are being asked to participate.  
- Focus Group– Some students may be asked to participate in focus groups who have similar responses to questions or who have common experiences. The purpose of the focus groups is to gauge how the school has impacted you.  

If you participate in the survey, the survey should only take approximately 15 minutes to complete. If you participate in the interview it should take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. If you participate in the focus group, it should take approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews and focus groups will be at school (Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School) or at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interview will take about one hour.  

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take??  

If you participate in the survey, the survey should only take approximately 15 minutes to complete. If you participate in the interview it should take approximately 45 minutes to an hour. If you participate in the
focus group, it should take approximately 60 to 90 minutes. Interviews and focus groups will be at school (Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School) or at a time and place that is convenient for you. The interview will take about one hour.

**Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?**

The researcher does not see any foreseeable risks, harms, discomforts or inconvenience that the participant may experience. However, if you would like to see a counselor about any difficulties you are having, please contact me.

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

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help influence steps to improve Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the researchers on this study will review the surveys, which will be used to develop notes. If you agree to participate in interviews, or focus groups, an audio recording will be made of the session and then later transcribed into a transcript. No names will be included in the transcript. Participants names in the transcript will be changed into fictitious names or into a number code (survey member 1, interview number 1, etc.). No names will be included in reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.

Surveys, audio tapes, and transcripts of interviews will be kept in the researcher’s locked cabinet at home. This data will be kept for at least 3 years and then destroyed.

Digital files and computer files will be kept on a jump drive and hard drive of researcher’s home computer.

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 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 Paula Manchester at (508) 997-4511 extension 3224 if you have any questions or concerns.

**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. 617-373-7570, email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.

**Will I be paid for my participation?**

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 may be questions in 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 investigate. These actions are taken to ensure the safety and well being of all students of New Bedford Public Schools.

If you are not 18 years old, written permission needs to be given by your parent or guardian.

**I agree to take part in this research. (Student)**

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Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies  
Investigator: Paula Manchester  
Title of Project: Evaluating an Alternative Pathway

Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Parent Participant Informed Consent

You are invited to take part in a research study that is being conducted within Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

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

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a parent of a child of Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School.

Why is this research study being done?

This research project seeks to evaluate Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School, a current dropout prevention strategy that is being used in the New Bedford district. This study will describe strategies and interventions used, as well as analyze how they are impacting students’ lives. It will also compare practices and interventions utilized at Whaling City Jr. Sr. High to effective practices used in alternative settings that serve our at-risk population of students.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask to do one, two, or all of the following.

- Interview – You will be interviewed asking questions with regard to your experience at Whaling City Jr. Sr. High.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

If you participate in the interview it should take approximately 45 minutes to an hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

The researcher does not see any foreseeable risks, harms, discomfot or inconvenience that the participant may experience. Your participation is voluntary. Consideration is given to the fact that the researcher is also the principal of the program. You can be assured that you can answer questions in the interview honestly, with this having any effect on your child’s standing at the school. You may decline to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.
Will I benefit by being in this research?

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help influence steps to improve Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School.

Who will see the information about me?

Your part in this study will be confidential. Only the research on this study will review the answers to questionnaires. If you agree to participate in interviews, an audio recording will be made of the session and then later transcribed into a transcript. No names will be included in the transcript. Participants names in transcript will be changed into fictitious names or into a number code (interview number 1, etc.). No names will be included in reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.

Audio tapes, and transcripts of interviews will be kept in the researcher’s locked cabinet at home. This data will be kept for at least 3 years and then destroyed.

Digital files and computer files will be kept on a jump drive and hard drive of researcher’s home computer. 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 parent of a child 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 parent of a child of New Bedford Public Schools.

Who can I contact if I have questions or problems?

Please call Paula Manchester at (508) 997-4511 extension 3224 if you have any questions or concerns.

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. 617-373-7570, email: irb@neu.edu. You may call anonymously if you wish.
Will I be paid for my participation?

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 I learn about child abuse, I am required to report these concerns to the Department of Child & Family Services for further investigation.

I agree to take part in this research.

Signature of person agreeing to take part

Date

Signature of parent

Date

Printed name of person above

Signature of person who explained the study to the subject

Date
Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Staff Participant Informed Consent

You are invited to take part in a research study that is being conducted within Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

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

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a staff member of Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School.

Why is this research study being done?

This research project seeks to evaluate Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School, a current dropout prevention strategy that is being used in the New Bedford district. This study will describe strategies and interventions used, as well as analyze how they are impacting students’ lives. It will also compare practices and interventions utilized at Whaling City Jr. Sr. High to effective practices used in alternative settings that serve our at-risk population of students.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask to do one, two, or all of the following.

- Staff Questionnaire: Answer open ended questions about experiences, thoughts and feelings about Whaling City Jr. Sr. High

- Interview: You will be interviewed asking questions with regard to your experience at Whaling City Jr. Sr. High.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

The questionnaire will take about 15 minutes.
If you participate in the interview it should take approximately 45 minutes to an hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

The researcher does not see any foreseeable risks, harms, discomforts or inconvenience that the participant may experience. Your participation is voluntary. Anything you say will not be held against you. Consideration is given to the fact that the researcher is also the principal of the program and may be your supervisor. You can be assured that you can answer questions in
questionnaire or interview honestly, and without concern about retribution. You may decline to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

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

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help influence steps to improve Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School.

**Who will see the information about me?**

Your participation in this study will be confidential. Only the research on this study will review the answers to questionnaires. If you agree to participate in interviews, an audio recording will be made of the session and then later transcribed into a transcript. No names will be included in the transcript. Participants’ names in transcript will be changed into fictitious names or into a number code (questionnaire member 1, interview number 1, etc.). No names will be included in reports or publications will use information that can identify you in any way.

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**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 an employee 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 an employee.

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

Please call Paula Manchester at (508) 997-4511 extension 3224 if you have any questions or concerns.

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Northeastern University, College of Professional Studies  
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Informed Consent to Participate in a Research Study: Staff Participant Informed Consent

You are invited to take part in a research study that is being conducted within Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School. This form will tell you about the study, but the researcher will explain it to you first. You may ask this person any questions that you have. When you are ready to make a decision, you may tell the researcher if you want to participate or not. You do not have to participate if you do not want to. If you decide to participate, the researcher will ask you to sign this statement and will give you a copy to keep.

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

You are being asked to participate in this study because you are a staff member of Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School.

Why is this research study being done?

This research project seeks to evaluate Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School, a current dropout prevention strategy that is being used in the New Bedford district. This study will describe strategies and interventions used, as well as analyze how they are impacting students’ lives. It will also compare practices and interventions utilized at Whaling City Jr. Sr. High to effective practices used in alternative settings that serve our at-risk population of students.

What will I be asked to do?

If you decide to take part in this study, we will ask to do one, two, or all of the following.

- Staff Questionnaire—Answer open ended questions about experiences, thoughts and feelings about Whaling City Jr. Sr. High

- Interview – You will be interviewed asking questions with regard to your experience at Whaling City Jr. Sr. High.

Where will this take place and how much of my time will it take?

The questionnaire will take about 15 minutes.
If you participate in the interview it should take approximately 45 minutes to an hour.

Will there be any risk or discomfort to me?

The researcher does not see any foreseeable risks, harms, discomforts or inconvenience that the participant may experience. Your participation is voluntary. Anything you say will not be held against you. Consideration is given to the fact that the researcher is also the principal of the program and may be your supervisor. You can be assured that you can answer questions in
questionnaire or interview honestly, and without concern about retribution. You may decline to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering.

Will I benefit by being in this research?

There will be no direct benefit to you for taking part in the study. However, the information learned from this study may help influence steps to improve Whaling City Jr. Sr. High School.

Who will see the information about me?

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Is there anything else I need to know?

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I agree to take part in this research.

Signature of person agreeing to take part Date

Printed name of person above

Signature of person who explained the study to the Date
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<th>Strongly Agree</th>
<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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How much do you agree with the following statements about your school:

1. Outside around the school
2. In the hallways and hallways
3. In your classes
4. I worry about crime and violence in school
5. I feel safe when security is present
6. I sometimes stay home because I don't feel safe at school.

Physical Safety

Safe and Respectful Climate

School Climate Connection Survey

Chicago Public Schools

CPS
How much do you agree with the following statements about your school:

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<th>Agree</th>
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<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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Most students in the school:

Emotional Safety

Chicago Public Schools

CPS
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<th>Agree</th>
<th>Disagree</th>
<th>Strongly Disagree</th>
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How much do you agree with the following statements about this class:

1. I expect me to do my best all the time.
2. Everyone in the class works hard.
3. I believe I can do well in school.
4. The topics we are studying are interesting and challenging.
5. This class really makes me think.

The teacher for the third class you have on Mondays:

Chicago Public Schools

CPS
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<th>Agree</th>
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My teachers:

CPS

Chicago Public Schools
In my school, there is at least ONE teacher who:

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- 8. Let students know when they are doing a good job.
- 7. Treat me with respect.
- 6. Really care about me.

My teachers:

- 1. Really listens to what I have to say.
- 2. Is willing to give extra help on school work if I need it.
- 3. Helps me catch up if I am behind.
- 4. Notices if I have trouble learning something.
- 5. Will help me improve my work.
- 6. Treat me with respect.
- 7. Let students know when they are doing a good job.

The teacher for the third class you have on Mondays:

Student Support

Chicago Public Schools

CPS
Chicago Public Schools

**CPS**

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<th>STRONGLY AGREE</th>
<th>STRONGLY DISAGREE</th>
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<td>1. I could ask to write me a recommendation for a job, program, or college.</td>
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<td>2. I could talk to if I was having problems in a class.</td>
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<td>3. It is easy to get help when I am doing in school.</td>
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<td>4. Really cares about how I am.</td>
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<td>5. Would be willing to help me with a personal problem.</td>
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13. There are people in this school who will help me if I need it.
Questions for Staff Questionnaire

You are invited to take part in a research study that is being conducted within Urban High School. The research project seeks to evaluate Urban High. The study will describe strategies and interventions used as well as analyze how they are impacting students’ lives. This questionnaire is anonymous. Your participation is voluntary. You do not have to participate if you don’t want to. However, the information learned in this study may help influence steps to improve Urban High School.

1. How long have you worked here at Urban High School?

2. Name three positive points or characteristics in your opinion that Urban High school has?

3. What are three negative characteristics in your opinion that Urban High school has?
4. What specific needs do students have at Urban High have that students in other schools in the district may not have?

5. Do you feel that Urban High School impact issues such as dropout?
   How?

6. Does Urban High address needs of specific students who attend the school? How?
7. Do you feel that Urban High provides educational equity and equality to students who attend the program? Please Explain.

8. Is there anything that you would like to add to this evaluation study?
1. How did you get to Urban High School?

2. How would you describe yourself?

3. How do you think others would describe you?

4. How does that make you feel?

5. What are the differences between Urban High and your previous school?

6. Did you have an attendance problem?
   a. If so, why did you have an attendance problem?

7. Do you think your attendance has improved, gotten worse or stayed the same since coming to Urban High? Why?

8. Did you have behavior issues at your previous school?

9. Do you think your behavior is better, worse or the same since coming to Urban High? Why?

10. What were you grades before coming to Urban High?
   a. If they were bad, why do you think they were bad?

   b. Were your grades ever good?

   c. What helped you get good grades?
11. Do you think your grades have improved, gone down, or remained the same since coming to Urban High? Why?

12. What issues led you to Urban High?

13. Has Urban High helped you with needs or issues?

14. What are your learning interests/needs?

15. Do you think Urban High supports your academic interests/needs?
   a. How do you think Urban High supports your academic interests?

16. Are you learning and are you challenged by the academics at Urban High?

17. What are you aspiration after school?
   a. Is school helping you pursue your aspirations?
   b. If yes, how? If no, why not?
Teacher Interview Questions (additional questions may be asked)

1. What is your professional experience at Urban High?

2. Have you worked at different school prior to Urban High?

3. What are the differences?

4. How do your experiences in other school settings compare to your current experience here at Urban High?

5. How do you perceive this school?

6. What are your teaching interests/needs?

7. What issues do you feel are obstacles to student success?

8. What are you positive experiences here at Urban High?

9. What are you negative experiences here at Urban High?

10. What issues to students have that impact their student success here?

11. How does Urban High address student needs?

12. Are you provided the resources to help you implement your lesson plans?

13. What are some of the obstacles you have with implementing your lesson plans?

14. Are you provided the professional development you need to work at Urban High?

15. What type of professional development would you need to help you in this setting?
Parent Interviews (additional questions may be asked)

1. How did your child come to Urban High School?
2. Is your child in middle school or in high school here at Urban High?
3. How has Urban High staff treated you since your child started here?
4. What type of experiences have you had with your child’s education?
5. What are the differences between Urban High and your child’s previous school?
6. Do you think your child’s attendance has improved, gotten worse or stayed the same since coming to Urban High? Why?
7. What specifically do you think has helped your student’s attendance?
8. Do you think your child’s behavior is better, worse or the same since coming to Urban High? Why?
9. Do you think your child’s grades have improved, gone down, or remained the same since coming to Urban High School? Why?
10. What specifically has helped your student’s grades?
11. What type of issues led your child here to Urban High?
12. Has Urban High helped your child with his/her needs or issues?
13. How did you feel about the academics here at Urban High?
14. What are your child’s learning interests/needs?
15. Do you think Urban High supports your child’s academic interests/needs?
16. Do you feel like your child is challenged by the academics at Urban High?

17. How can Urban High improve with regard to your child?

18. What are your child’s aspirations after school?

   c. Is school helping your child pursue your aspirations?

   d. If yes, how? If no, why not?