

ABSTRACT

Title of Document: HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS
OF THE ROLE OF THE STUDENT
INTERVENTION SPECIALIST IN
PREVENTING DROPOUTS

Boyd John Michael III, Doctor of Education, 2014

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This qualitative study investigated and determined both commonalities and differences in a school system's high school principals' perceptions and expectations of the High School Dropout Prevention/Intervention Services Specialist position. These positions are more commonly referred to as student intervention specialists, and the individuals hired for these positions primarily focus on reducing high school dropouts and supporting students' efforts to graduate.

The researcher used face-to-face interviews to determine critical responsibilities of the student intervention specialist position. Principals were asked five open-ended questions to evoke their perceptions of the role of the student intervention specialist in preventing dropouts and increasing graduation rates of high school students.

Sixteen themes emerged from the principal interviews. Ten themes were specific descriptors of the responsibilities of the student intervention specialist as perceived by the

principals: advocates and relationship builders, staff liaisons, community connectors, team members, academic supporters, attendance monitors, crisis managers, transition facilitators, cohort graduation monitors, and graduation coaches. Six of the emerged themes were identified changes or support for the student intervention specialist position: resources, employment, caseloads, professional development, qualifications, and the position as a worthwhile investment.

The study validates the support principals have for the student intervention specialist position in reducing dropouts and increasing graduation rates. The researcher offers ten recommendations as a result of the study which may further contribute to the position's success: a review of the current job description, a change of the job title, an enhancement of available resources to support the position, the development of a contact list of community resources, an expansion of the position from 10-months to 12-months, differentiated professional development, manageable caseloads, information supplied to high school principals regarding the outcomes of the study, refinements to hiring practices, and a review of the study by senior staff.

The results of this study are important because of the increasing need for students to minimally graduate from high school to prepare for the 21st century workforce. Each school system must use limited resources to maximize student achievement. An outcome of this study confirms the worth of the student intervention specialist in support of this effort at a minimal cost and a substantial return on investment.

HIGH SCHOOL PRINCIPALS' PERCEPTIONS
OF THE ROLE OF THE STUDENT INTERVENTION SPECIALIST IN
PREVENTING DROPOUTS

by

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Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my family for their unwavering support and unconditional love, and to God for his forgiveness of my sins and daily guidance that directs my path.

In memory of my dad, Boyd Michael Jr., who was a lifelong educator, both professionally and at home. He taught me to be a man of integrity and how to work hard to accomplish difficult tasks.

In honor of my wife, Denise Michael, and mom, Vivian Michael, who supported my every step in this process. Without their assistance and encouragement this dissertation would not have been possible.

In honor of my children, Amy, Jacob, Laura; son-in-law Scott; and grandchildren Adam and Ben who continue to bring me great joy and happiness.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction to Study

Introduction

Every 27 seconds a student drops out of high school. That equates to approximately 6,400 students per day and 1.2 million students every year (Swanson, 2011, p. 23). These alarming statistics motivate school systems across the United States of America to seek strategies and interventions to support students who are at risk of dropping out of school. Maximized school system financial resources and human capital are a must to ensure that all students continue in school and therefore can be successful and prepared to graduate from high school and secure gainful employment and preparation for post-secondary lifelong learning.

Students who fail to minimally obtain a high school diploma will struggle to remain competitive in the 21st century. The educational requirements for jobs and employment opportunities have changed dramatically in recent years and will continue to evolve and require a more educated workforce.

In the 19th and 20th centuries, electricity and the internal combustion engine drove the rise of manufacturing and America's shift away from an agrarian economy. In the 21st century, computers and related inventions are transforming the U.S. economic landscape—boosting productivity so companies can produce more with less and spurring an economic shift from Manufacturing to Services. That is why, when old-line Manufacturing and Natural Resources jobs disappear, they often don't come back.

Their replacements tend to be very different kinds of jobs, requiring very different kinds of employees—and very different kinds of preparation. Just as the industrial revolution was critical to building a mass K–12 educational system to feed workers into the Manufacturing industries, the information revolution is spurring the development of a mass postsecondary system to fill the needs of sophisticated new industries, such as Computer Systems Design or Financial Services.

(Carnevale, Smith, & Strohl, 2010, p. 110)

Data show that students who drop out of school traditionally earn less money than students who graduate from high school and institutions of higher learning. According to an October 18, 2012, press release from the United States Department of Labor:

By educational attainment, full-time workers age 25 and over without a high school diploma had median weekly earnings of \$464, compared with \$648 for high school graduates (no college) and \$1,170 for those holding at least a bachelor's degree. Among college graduates with advanced degrees (professional or master's degree and above), the highest earning 10 percent of male workers made \$3,448 or more per week, compared with \$2,311 or more for their female counterparts. (United States Department of Labor, 2012, p. 2)

Additionally, the data indicate that students who drop out of high school are far more likely to be unemployed. The unemployment rate for individuals 25 years and older with less than a high school diploma was 14.9% in 2010 and 14.1% in 2011. Unemployment rates for individuals in the same age bracket and time period that had no college experience, but did have a high school diploma, were 10.3% and 9.4% respectively (United States Department of Labor, 2011, p. 1).

Graduation rates have improved in recent years, but the number of students who drop out of high school and do not graduate remains at a crisis level that not only impacts the individual dropout's future, but the future welfare of the nation. "Across the United States, a total of 3,128,022 public school students received a high school diploma in 2009–10, resulting in a calculated Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR) of 78.2 percent" (Stillwell & Sable, 2013, p. 4). The Alliance For Excellent Education (2011) estimated that had all of the high school dropouts for the class of 2011 graduated, the impact to the national economy would be \$154 billion over the working career of these individuals (p. 1).

Not graduating from high school increases the potential for many negative consequences beyond those regarding employment and future earning potential. Chapter II will explore the challenges and factors contributing to high school dropouts.

Background for This Study

The negative plight for young adults without a high school diploma and the increasing demands of a more educated workforce has increased awareness nationally to reduce the number of students dropping out of high school. The most recent reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 in 2001, generally referred to as No Child Left Behind, heightened school systems' attention to the dropout and graduation rates. This federal law requires school systems to measure high school students' proficiency in math, reading, and one other academic indicator. Maryland chose to require lowering the dropout rate and increasing the graduation rate as its additional indicator to meet Adequate Yearly Progress targets.

A significant change to graduation rate calculations occurred in 2008, when the United States Department of Education required all states accepting federal funding under Title I to adopt the four-year adjusted cohort model for measuring graduation rates by 2010-2011 (United States Department of Education, 2008). Prior to this requirement and concurrently until the model could be fully implemented with the transition of the first ninth-grade cohort to reach the senior year, Maryland used a method known as the Leaver rate. The new method of measuring student graduation rates reflects an effort at the federal level to require that all states and school systems use a consistent model to measure graduation rates. Even under the full requirements of No Child Left Behind, states had been using different methods to calculate graduation rates and meet the established requirements.

Since 2000, the school system in this study has experienced a significant reduction in the number of students dropping out of school, increasing the graduation rate. Prior to 2010, Maryland applied only the Leaver rate for calculating graduation rates. According to a Maryland State Department of Education website, graduation rates in this school system have increased using the Leaver rate method from 78.30 percent in 2000 to 92.11 percent in 2012 (Maryland State Department of Education, 2013g).

During this time period, the school system implemented numerous dropout prevention efforts, instructional interventions for students, and professional development opportunities for teachers to increase student achievement. The implementation of a range of programs and practices during this time period makes it challenging to determine the factors that had the most significant influence on the dropout reduction. The dropout prevention efforts mirror many of the best practices identified in research.

The National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2012a) has listed 15 effective strategies in four major groups: (a) School and Community Perspective; (b) Early Interventions; (c) Basic Core Strategies; and (d) Making the Most of Instruction (pp. 1-2).

The school system recognizes that many of the best practices involve early identification and early intervention and fully supports these efforts (Kennelly & Monrad, 2007). However, many students still are promoted or transferred to high school without the benefit of such efforts, or the early intervention efforts were less than successful, and the students remain at great risk of dropping out without additional adult intervention. Many of these students demonstrate a pattern of school disengagement as evidenced by low standardized test scores, poor attendance, failing grades, and behavioral issues (Henry, Knight, & Thornberry, 2012, p. 165).

Because so many students still need additional support in high school, one of the intervention strategies implemented by the school system was the development of a new, full-time high school position to provide intensive support for high school students who are at risk of dropping out. The school system's adoption of the position was based on the research promoting the need for students in jeopardy of dropping out of high school to maintain strong adult relationships and support systems. The primary role of this position is to provide support and to ensure that students earn a high school diploma. The position began in 2003 and was originally titled "Dropout Prevention/Student Intervention Paraprofessional." The positions were first initiated at the schools with the highest dropout rates, and positions were gradually added to other high schools by the mid 2000's. The job description was revised, and the position was upgraded in pay in 2007. Additionally, the job title was officially changed to "High School Dropout

Prevention Intervention Services Specialist” and is more commonly referred to as “student intervention specialist.”

The job description (see Appendix A) identifies 18 specific responsibilities and duties for the individuals employed in these positions. The following is a brief reference to each: (a) implement dropout prevention efforts; (b) meet regularly with targeted students; (c) provide case management; (d) assist in reducing absenteeism, improving grades, and reducing discipline referrals; (e) develop effective working relationships with families; (f) collaborate with school-based personnel; (g) facilitate student transition from middle school to high school; (h) develop effective relationships with community agencies; (i) participate in intake and transfer processes; (j) arrange for academic support; (k) monitor requirements for graduation; (l) monitor student withdrawals; (m) participate in behavior and conflict management; (n) participate with school student support team; (o) assist with special activities; (p) maintain documentation; (q) maintain confidentiality; (r) demonstrate professional demeanor; and (s) perform other duties as requested.

Graduation rate expectations have continued to evolve since the implementation of No Child Left Behind, the inception of the student intervention specialist positions, and the 2008 graduation rate calculation changes. According to the Maryland State Department of Education Supplemental Educational Services website:

In the fall of 2011, the United States Department of Education (USDE) offered States and local school systems the ability to waive some of the mandates of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that was reauthorized as the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) Act of 2001. (Maryland State Department of Education, 2012d, p. 1)

Maryland State Department of Education elected to pursue the waiver, and it was subsequently granted for implementation for the 2012-2013 school year. Through this waiver application process, Maryland is permitted to identify student growth targets that would replace the originally defined targets established through No Child Left Behind. The waiver affords Maryland school systems increased latitude associated with math proficiency, reading proficiency, and graduation rates.

On October 31, 2012, the Maryland State Department of Education released a statement indicating that Maryland continues to demonstrate progress in reducing the dropout rate and increasing the four-year cohort adjusted graduation rate for students graduating in 2011. The document indicates that the four-year cohort graduation rate increased .85 percentage points between 2010 and 2011, from 81.97 to 82.82 percent. The October 31, 2012, press release highlights new State Superintendent Dr. Lowery's concern regarding the dropout rate. She states:

A high school diploma represents the first step in gaining the requisite preparation for a student's next step, be it the workforce or college. The data offer good news, but there remain too many students who leave our classrooms prior to graduation. That must continue to change. (Maryland State Department of Education, 2012c, p. 1)

The Maryland State Department of Education's latest information regarding four-year adjusted cohort graduation rates for students includes data for 2012. The information indicates that the four-year cohort graduation rate increased .75 percentage points between 2011 and 2012, from 82.82 to 83.57 percent (Maryland State Department

of Education, 2013a, p. 1). Significantly the 83.57 percent rate indicates that over 16% of Maryland high school students are not graduating in a four-year period.

The system's aggregate four-year adjusted graduation cohort rate increased from 89.79 percent in 2010 to 90.40 percent in 2011. It decreased .64 percentage points in 2012 to 89.76 percent. The disparity between the system's graduates and non-graduates in 2011 using the four-year adjusted cohort formula represents 159 students in 2011 and 172 students in 2012. The school system's graduation rate using the four-year adjusted cohort model was 7.58 percentage points and 6.19 percentage points higher than the Maryland rates in 2011 and 2012, respectively (Maryland State Department of Education, 2013b) .

Statement of the Research Problem

While the system has experienced significant growth in the graduation rate of students since June 2000, many students still are not graduating. Examination of the data on the Maryland State Department of Education website indicates a potential flattening trend of the graduation rate. When applying the Leaver rate method, the system's graduation rate declined from 92.48 percent in 2010 to 91.70 percent in 2011. The rate increased in 2012 to 92.11 percent. While the Leaver rate is no longer used to determine a school's or school system's Adequate Yearly Progress, it remains a long-term indicator associated with trend data in a school or school system in Maryland.

Maryland has calculated the four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate for only 2010, 2011, and 2012. Based on the available data for the school system, a trend is indeterminate. In addition to the potential flattening of the graduation rate there are notable graduation achievement gaps for various sub-groups of students. Comparing the

2012 graduation rate of 89.76 percent for all students to the 78.61 percent for African American students (Maryland State Department of Education, 2013c), the 86.59 percent rate for Hispanic students (Maryland State Department of Education, 2013e), the 61.88 percent rate for special education students (Maryland State Department of Education, 2013f), and the 81.80 percent rate for free and reduced meal students (Maryland State Department of Education, 2013d) illustrates some of these disparities. Furthermore, there are achievement gaps among the various high schools within the county. Maryland and national data reflect similar sub-group gaps in graduation rates.

The school system must continue to seek resources and supports for all students to achieve a high school diploma. No specific data are available to reflect the value of the student intervention specialist position in increasing graduation rates. Understanding the principals' perceptions of the role of this position in supporting student graduation rates is important for the continuation of the position as currently defined. Like many school systems, this one does not have financial or human resources to waste. Maximizing the available resources, including human capital, is paramount to the success of the system's students and community.

Purpose of the Study

High school principals are responsible for the utilization of all resources available. Principals are also responsible and held accountable for all student achievement and data for the school. The district created student intervention specialist positions to address the dropout rate and support increased student graduation rates. It is the principal's responsibility to appropriately supervise and utilize this position to achieve the intended outcome.

The researcher sought to determine both commonalities and differences in principals' perceptions and expectations of the student intervention specialist position. Through this effort, the researcher determined critical responsibilities of the student intervention specialist.

Research Question

The primary question of this study was: Based on principals' perceptions, what is the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates?

Related questions include the following:

1. From the principals' perceptions, what strategies should the student intervention specialist implement to most effectively reduce the number of high school dropouts?
2. From the principals' perceptions, what enhancements should be added to support the student intervention specialist position?

Limitations of the Study

This qualitative study, based on high school principal perceptions, identified the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing the number of dropouts and increasing the graduation rates in the system studied. It did not explore the perceptions of other principals in the system or principals in other districts in Maryland or across the country that employ similar positions.

Prior to adopting generalizations associated with this study, readers should be cognizant of the unique nature of the student intervention specialist role in that it serves as an additional resource and support for students. The position is not intended to be a

substitute for other resources that the student needs to be successful and graduate. For example, the duties differ from the role of the traditional school counselor or social worker who has a myriad of responsibilities beyond those identified as part of the student intervention specialist job. The school system studied uses student intervention specialists to focus solely on supporting students at risk of dropping out.

High school principals were purposefully selected to be interviewed because they ultimately hold the responsibility for student achievement for their schools, including student graduation and dropout rates. The intent of the research regarded the ideal role of a student intervention specialist as perceived by the high school principals. The researcher encouraged principals to answer questions honestly and without bias or consideration for the individual employed in the position at the school.

For many years the individuals holding high school principal positions were long-term and tenured. In recent years, a number of new high school principals have been appointed in the system. Some principals have had a long history regarding the subject of student intervention specialists and others are less familiar.

The researcher presently is a member of the superintendent's senior cabinet at the central office and has a positive working relationship with all high school principals. The principals were free to respond candidly regarding their perceptions, knowing that the interview process did not relate to the use of the position or the skills and talents of the current student intervention specialist.

The researcher acknowledges a passion for helping students stay in school, prepare for their future, and graduate. In former roles at the school system's administrative office, the researcher held positions that directly supervised high school

principals. While in those positions, the system implemented many interventions to support student graduation. The student intervention specialist position was just one of those intervention efforts.

The researcher continues to have interest in any successful endeavor to support student graduation, including the successful implementation and use of all resources. In the researcher's current role it is necessary to review the use of all resources, pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. The financial investment required to maintain the student intervention specialist position prompts an evaluation. Knowing that the student intervention specialist position had not been formally reviewed since 2007, the researcher selected this topic for study, exercising caution to limit any bias based on his passion for reducing dropouts and increasing graduation rates.

Study Approach

This qualitative study examined the perceptions of principals as they related to the role of the student intervention specialist. Specifically, the researcher sought to determine both commonalities and differences in principals' perceptions and expectations of the student intervention specialist position. The researcher purposefully selected high school principals to interview one-on-one. Each principal was asked the same set of initial questions to prompt an open dialogue. The interviewer reviewed the responses to identify emerging themes and patterns regarding the principals' perceptions. Chapter III includes additional information regarding the methodology used for this study.

Definition of Terms

Adequate Yearly Progress:

Is a measure of year-to-year student achievement on statewide assessments. Each state comes up with its own definition on what it means to make AYP. Definitions must answer three questions: the percentage of students that must be proficient or above when tested in reading and mathematics (yearly in grades 3-8 and once in high school); whether or not at least 95 percent of students in those grades participated in the assessments; and, the additional academic indicator (e.g., graduation rates for high schools) that will be measured. (ED Data Express, n.d., p.1)

Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965:

Passed as part of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) provides federal funding to the neediest students and schools. It was reauthorized eight times since 1965. The most recent reauthorization of the ESEA was the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 (NCLB). (ED Data Express, n.d., p.1)

Four-Year Adjusted Cohort Rate:

The four-year adjusted cohort graduation rate is the number of students who graduate in four years with a regular high school diploma divided by the number of students who form the adjusted cohort for the graduating class. For any given cohort, students who are entering grade 9 for the first time form a cohort that is subsequently “adjusted” by adding any students who transfer into the cohort later during the next three years and subtracting any students who transfer out,

emigrate to another country, or die during that same period. (Maryland State Department of Education, 2012b, p. 1)

Leaver Rate:

The percentage of students who received a Maryland high school diploma during the reported school year. This is an estimated cohort rate. It is calculated by dividing the number of high school graduates by the sum of the dropouts for grades 9 through 12, respectively, in consecutive years, plus the number of high school graduates. (Maryland State Department of Education, 2012b, p. 1)

Student Intervention Specialist:

This term is an abbreviated reference for the official title of High School Dropout Prevention Intervention Services Specialist. This is a full-time, non-certificated, high school position that provides intensive support for high school students who are at risk of dropping out. The current job description for this position identifies 18 specific responsibilities and duties.

CHAPTER II

Literature Review

Introduction

The percentage of students who drop out of high school nationally has declined slightly in recent years, and high school graduation rates have increased. While this trend demonstrates promise, the negative outcomes of those students who drop out of high school remain alarming.

The decision to drop out is a dangerous one for the student. Dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced, and single parents with children who drop out from high school themselves.

(Bridgeland, DiIulio, & Morison, 2006, p. i)

This literature review examines the dropout crisis that exists in the United States of America and explores dropout intervention strategies that promotes student graduation. Specifically, this chapter addresses the following topics: (a) national statistics associated with student dropout and graduation; (b) challenges facing high school dropouts; (c) factors contributing to student dropout; (d) successful strategies that promote student graduation and prevent students from dropping out of high school; and (e) the significant role of high school principals as instructional leaders.

High School Student Dropout and Graduation Status

Dropout and graduation rates are two different statistical school system measures. An annual dropout rate is a measure using various formulas to determine the percentage

of all high school students who leave high school in a given year. A graduation rate is a measure of the percentage of students who graduate high school.

Graduation Status

Prior to the adoption of new federal regulations in 2008, calculation formulas for dropout and graduation rates differed district-to-district and state-to-state, which significantly influenced accurate comparisons. In November 2012 the United States Department of Education, for the first time, released information utilizing the adjusted four-year cohort model as the standard for all states. America's Promise Alliance notes the significance of a national formula.

The transition to a common, adjusted four-year cohort graduation rate reflects states' efforts to create greater uniformity and transparency in reporting high school graduation data, and it meets the requirements of October 2008 federal regulations. A key goal of these regulations was to develop a graduation rate that provides parents, educators and community members with better information on their school's progress while allowing for meaningful comparisons of graduation rates across states and school districts. The new graduation rate measurement also accurately accounts for students who drop out or who do not earn a regular high school diploma. (America's Promise Alliance, 2012, para. 4)

With the adoption of a standardized formula, some states reported an increase in graduation rates, while other states reported a decline in graduation rates. Of the reported adjusted four-year cohort graduation rates, the District of Columbia reported the lowest graduation rate at 59 percent, while the highest graduation rate reported was from Iowa at

88 percent. According to the release of information, Maryland's graduation rate was 83 percent for the 2010-2011 school year (ED Data Express, 2012, p. 2).

United States Secretary of Education Arne Duncan further reinforced the need for a standardized, federal formula. "By using this new measure, states will be more honest in holding schools accountable and ensuring that students succeed. Ultimately, these data will help states target support to ensure more students graduate on time, college and career ready" (Huff Post Education, 2012, para. 3).

National graduation rate data using the adjusted four-year cohort model were not available in November 2012 when the state-by-state data were released. After a thorough evaluation, the U.S. Department of Education will release the national adjusted four-year cohort graduation rate using the same model as the states (Stillwell & Sable, 2013, p. 1).

In January 2013 the U.S. Department of Education released national graduation data for the school year 2009-2010 using the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate (AFGR).

The AFGR provides an estimate of the percentage of high school students who graduate within 4 years of first starting 9th grade. The rate uses aggregate student enrollment data to estimate the size of an incoming freshman class and counts of the number of diplomas awarded 4 years later. (Stillwell & Sable, 2013, p. 1)

The report indicated that the calculated national graduation rate using the Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate model was 78.2 percent for the 2009-2010 school year. The rates ranged from state-to-state from 57.8 percent in Nevada to 91.4 percent in Vermont. The Averaged Freshman Graduation Rate for Maryland for 2009-2010 was 82.2 percent (Stillwell & Sable, 2013, p. 7).

Dropout Status

According to data from the National Center for Education Statistics (2012) the annual dropout rate in the United States of America has decreased from 12.1 percent in 1990 for individuals, ages 16 to 24, to 7.4 percent for the same age bracket in 2010. This pattern in the dropout rate encompasses various race and ethnicity populations as well.

The comparison of data from the same source (National Center for Education Statistics 2012) between the time period of 1999 to 2010 indicated the following information regarding dropout rates:

Whites decreased from 9% to 5.1%

Blacks decreased from 13.2% to 8%

Hispanics decreased from 32.4% to 15.1%

These declines reflect a national effort to increase student graduation rates and eliminate students from dropping out of school. However, the rate at which students continue to drop out of school remains disconcerting. Additionally, the discrepancies between white student dropout rates and the dropout rates of blacks and Hispanics are disturbing.

In January 2013 the U.S. Department of Education released national dropout data specific to the 2009-2010 school year. “Across the United States, a total of 514,238 public school students dropped out of grades 9-12, resulting in a calculated overall event dropout rate of 3.4 percent in 2009-10” (Stillwell & Sable, 2013, p. 4). New Hampshire had the lowest event dropout rate of 1.2 percent, while Arizona had the highest dropout rate at 7.8 percent. According to the data, Maryland’s event dropout rate was 2.7 percent (Stillwell & Sable, 2013, p. 13).

Challenges Facing High School Dropouts

A review of statistical data indicates that individuals who drop out of high school encounter significant challenges and hardships.

Employment

A correlation exists between one's level of education and unemployment. Individuals 25 years and older who earned less than a high school diploma experienced a 14.1 percent unemployment rate on average in 2011, while individuals with a high school diploma experienced a 9.4 percent average unemployment rate. Individuals in this same age bracket with an associate degree experienced an average 6.8 percent unemployment rate for 2011, while individuals that held a bachelor's degree or higher experienced only a 4.3 percent unemployment rate (United States Department of Labor, 2011, p. 1).

Research suggests that educational levels are a significant factor in employment. "Young people with limited education and job-readiness skills find fewer employment opportunities. This is especially true of those from low-income families and living in high-poverty communities" (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2012, p. 5). It is evident that the job market in the 21st century is evolving and requires greater skills and education.

Lagging high school graduation rates come at a time when the demands of today's globally competitive economy have placed a premium on education. In the last 40 years, the equation has completely flipped – in 1973, 73 percent of all U.S. jobs required only a high school diploma, while in this and future decades, most jobs will require not only finishing high school, but also some college. (Balfanz, Bridgeland, Bruce, & Fox, 2012, p. 16)

Beyond the challenges high school dropouts encounter with unemployment, those individuals that are employed tend to earn far less when compared to individuals that have graduated from high school and beyond. According to an October 18, 2012, news release from the United States Department of Labor's Bureau of Labor Statistics:

By educational attainment, full-time workers age 25 and over without a high school diploma had median weekly earnings of \$464, compared with \$648 for high school graduates (no college) and \$1,170 for those holding at least a bachelor's degree. Among college graduates with advanced degrees (professional or master's degree and above), the highest earning 10 percent of male workers made \$3,448 or more per week, compared with \$2,311 or more for their female counterparts. (United States Department of Labor, 2012, p. 2)

Based on this information and over the lifetime of an individual, the total earnings difference between high school dropouts and individuals with a high school diploma and beyond is significant.

Health

Individuals over 25 years old that graduate from high school or obtain higher levels of education statistically experience better health conditions than individuals in the same age bracket that drop out of high school.

Level of education was positively associated with health status; 74% of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher were in excellent or very good health compared with 39% of adults with less than a high school diploma. Twenty-seven percent of adults with less than a high school diploma were in fair or poor

health compared with 6% of adults with a bachelor's degree or higher. (Pleis, Lucas, & Ward, 2009, p. 10)

Additionally, studies indicate that high school dropouts tend to visit the doctor less frequently than individuals who graduate from high school or secure higher levels of education. "Adults with less than a high school diploma were less likely to have last seen a doctor within the last 6 months, and were more likely to have never seen a doctor, than adults with more education" (Pleis et al., 2009, p. 14).

Criminal Activity

Students who drop out of high school experience a greater risk of being involved in criminal activity and incarceration. Studies indicate there is a strong correlation between high school dropouts and violent felony referrals (Ikomi, 2010, p. 383). Using Census and FBI data, Lochner and Moretti (2004) concluded that "schooling significantly reduces the probability of incarceration and arrest" (p. 155).

Contributing Factors to High School Dropouts

There are many individual, family, school, and community factors that influence students dropping out of high school. Understanding these factors and recognizing them in students are critical to addressing the dropout crisis. Researchers continue to study factors associated with student dropout with the aim of further addressing this national crisis.

What the studies show is that failure to graduate is usually the result of a whole set of influences that affect children from early in their lives through their entire school careers. As many researchers describe it, failing to graduate, or "dropping out", is a process, not an event. (Levin, 2012, p. 16)

The accuracy of dropout predictions increases when combinations of multiple risk factors are considered. Dropouts are not a homogeneous group. Many subgroups of students can be identified based on when risk factors emerge, the combinations of risk factors experienced, and how the factors influence them. Dropping out of school is often the result of a long process of disengagement that may begin before a child enters school. (Hammond, Linton, Smink, & Drew, 2007, p. 2)

Family Structure/Influence

A correlation exists between family structure and the risk of a student dropping out of school. Children from single-mother families are twice as likely to drop out of school as children from two-parent families. Additionally, children from single-parent families tend to have lower grade-point averages and fail to attend school at the same rate as children from two-parent families (McLanahan, 1996, p. 18).

Similar statistical outcomes from other studies further reinforce the relationship between family structure and the likelihood of a student dropping out of school.

For all groups combined, having only one parent in the home is associated with a substantially higher dropout rate than having both parents present (a 66 percent higher rate if the one parent is female and a 78 percent higher rate if that parent is male). Having neither parent present is associated with a dropout rate 2-1/2 times greater than the rate with both parents in the home. The absence of a male parent generally seems to make less difference than the absence of the female parent, although for blacks the opposite is true. (Barro & Kolstad, 1987, p. 29)

A child's likelihood of dropping out of high school increases if a family member or members are high school dropouts.

The chances are greater that a teenager will leave school before graduating if his or her parents also dropped out of school. If one adolescent in a family has dropped out, it increases the likelihood that his or her siblings will also leave school before graduating. (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 14)

A longitudinal study of children from age six months until age 19 suggests that some children enter the dropout pathway very early in their lives.

The child's early home environment and quality of early caregiving emerged as powerful predictors of whether a student remained in a traditional program or dropped out of high school. Measures of SES, IQ, problem behaviors, academic achievement, peer competence, and parent involvement from elementary school through adolescence were also significant predictors of high school status at age 19. (Jimerson, Egeland, Sroufe, & Carlson, 2000, pp. 542-543)

Actively involved parents that demonstrate positive parenting increase the probability of their child's graduation from high school.

Recent research has demonstrated that students develop more psychosocial maturity and do better in school when they come from families in which parents monitor and regulate their children's activities at the same time that they provide emotional support and encourage independent decision making. (Rumberger, 1995, p. 587)

The educational obtainment levels of parents serves as a factor in the likelihood of a student dropping out of school. As the level of parental education obtainment increases, the likelihood of their child graduating increases as well. Conversely, the

likelihood of a child dropping out increases when reared by parents who dropped out of school (Barro & Kolstad, 1987, p. 27).

Low Income Status

Living in poverty poses many challenges for students, especially in the area of education and securing a high school diploma. “The factors most strongly and consistently linked to the incidence of dropping out are indicators of family socioeconomic status (SES) and other aspects of family background” (Barro & Kolstad, 1987, p. 2).

The relationship of dropout rates to the composite SES index is similar to the relationship to parents' education. Dropout rates of students in the lowest SES quartile are three times greater, on average, than rates of students in the highest quartile. (Barro & Kolstad, 1987, p. 28)

“Research has consistently found that socioeconomic status, most commonly measured by parental education and income, is a powerful predictor of school achievement and dropout behavior” (Rumberger, 1995, p. 587). “Even controlling for a host of other factors, students from low social class families were twice as likely to drop out as students from average social class families” (Rumberger, 1995, p. 616).

Children that are raised in high-poverty neighborhoods are more likely to drop out of school than children that are raised in more affluent neighborhoods. Additionally, the same research has linked the likelihood of children from high-poverty neighborhoods with an increased likelihood of being connected with teenage pregnancy (Harding, 2003, pp. 712-713).

Family poverty was related to the prevalence of youth who were neither enrolled in school nor working. In each year observed, the percentage of youth neither enrolled in school nor working was higher for those from poor families than for those from non-poor families. In 2011, the percentages for these groups were 27 percent and 11 percent, respectively. (Aud et al., 2012, p. 74)

Involvement With the Legal System

A Chicago study linked early involvement with the legal system as a contributing factor to high school dropouts, particularly for inner-city minority students. Students who had been arrested one or more times were more likely to drop out of high schools than students who had not been arrested (Hirschfield, 2009).

Academic Achievement

Students who are academically successful are less at risk of dropping out of school.

An individual's school experiences have been found to have a major impact on the likelihood that he or she will graduate. School performance and engagement with school are two of the primary experiences. Poor academic performance is one of the most consistent predictors of dropout, whether measured through grades, test scores, or course failure. It has been found to impact dropout starting in the 1st grade and continuing throughout elementary school, into middle, and on into high school. (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 12)

While poor grades are a strong predictor of a student dropping out of school, the converse is true as well. One study determined that students with good grades, more so than high test scores, were likely to graduate from high school. "Interestingly, good

grades are a more powerful predictor of staying in school than high test scores, suggesting that students are more influenced by their relative standing to their peers than a more absolute measure of their academic performance” (Rumberger, 1995, p. 606).

Retention

Students who are retained in one grade or more are more likely to drop out of high school than students who are never retained. Some studies suggest that a student being retained is one of the strongest predictors of future drop outs. “Several school-related factors were significant predictors of dropping out. The single most powerful predictor was whether a student was held back in an earlier grade” (Rumberger, 1995, p. 616).

As for low achievement, beginning in 1st grade, retention at any grade level has been found to impact the chances that a student will drop out. What makes retention so powerful is that its effects are additive, where multiple retentions dramatically increase the odds that a student will drop out. (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 12)

Although correlated to achievement, retention had an impact on dropping out independent of academic performance, other school experiences, and personal characteristics. Something about the experience of being retained and being older than grade-level peers increases the likelihood of dropping out. (Hammond et al., 2007, pp. 26-27)

Research on dropouts has consistently shown that a host of negative school-related experiences serves as powerful precursors to the decision to formally leave school. For example, students who drop out of school are more likely than other students to have poor school performance, disruptive behaviors, poor attendance,

negative attitudes toward school, and early school failure – particularly, repeating grades. (Rumberger, 1995, p. 588)

Family Involvement

Research suggests that family and parental involvement in their child's education influences their child's educational success. Programs and interventions that connect and involve family members as well as the students have been linked to higher student achievement. "This relationship holds across families of all economic, racial/ethnic, and educational backgrounds and for students at all ages" (Henderson & Mapp, 2002, p. 24).

The lack of parental involvement in the learning process serves as a contributing factor in decreasing student achievement resulting in students dropping out of school. Some parents are hesitant or experience cultural barriers in partnering with schools to support their children. Recent studies suggest that parents who achieve higher levels of education, maintain a higher socio-economic status, and earn higher incomes are more actively involved in partnering with school staff and supporting their children's education (Harris & Goodall, 2008, p. 286).

In another study, Rumberger (1995) determined that parent involvement was critical to the academic success of students and in reducing the risk of students dropping out of school.

Students of actively involved parents were much less likely to drop out than other students. Students who reported less parental supervision had 34% higher odds of dropping out than other students. Both of these results support the growing research literature that shows parental academic support and supervision are important predictors of academic success in school. (Rumberger, 1995, p. 603)

Family involvement in a child's education is one contributing factor in a child's educational success. Another contributing factor is the family's beliefs associated with education.

Parent attitude was also a strong predictor of success. Students whose parents held a favorable attitude about schooling and their children's abilities were almost two times more likely to stay in school than the students of parents who held the opposing view. This effect was consistent across all school levels and was present even before the student's first report card was issued. Across all levels, improved school performance (based on grades, test scores, and retention rates) increased the likelihood of school completion. (Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2003, para. 6)

Student Engagement

Students who are not engaged in school either academically or socially are at greater risk of dropping out of school. A student's lack of engagement in the educational process extends beyond school dropout; including substance abuse, teenage pregnancy, and criminal activity.

“Engagement is associated with positive academic outcomes, including achievement and persistence in school; and it is higher in classrooms with supportive teachers and peers, challenging and authentic tasks, opportunities for choice, and sufficient structure” (Fredricks, Blumenfeld, & Paris, 2004, p. 87). Students who lack positive academic outcomes in high school can quickly become disengaged with school, and the negative consequences become insurmountable without immediate intervention to support student success.

A student's attitude toward school and education can either have a positive or negative influence on their likelihood of graduating from high school. The lack of student engagement as identified in a student's attitude can manifest itself well before the student's high school years.

Students' attitudes in eighth grade also predicted dropping out of school.

Students with high locus of control and self-concept were much less likely to drop out of school than other students. Students who only expected to graduate from high school were almost 7 times as likely to drop out of school as other students. Eighth-grade students who felt that other students saw them as a troublemaker and not a good student were 50% more likely to drop out compared to other students. Finally, students who felt that their academic subjects were not going to be useful in their future or felt unsafe at school were more likely to drop out between the 8th and 10th grades. (Rumberger, 1995, p. 604)

Poor attendance is another indicator of student disengagement. A recent study by Schoeneberger (2012) categorized various students by their attendance patterns demonstrated over their school careers. Schoeneberger determined that there is a strong relationship between attendance patterns and student success in high school.

These students, exhibiting elevated prevalence to missing more than 10 percent of their registered school days, are on a path that is significantly more likely to end in dropout when compared to students that attend school on a regular basis. (Schoeneberger, 2012, p. 12)

The connection between attendance and academic performance was further confirmed in a 2011 study regarding absenteeism and academic performance on National

Assessment of Educational Progress reading assessments. Consistently, students who missed more than five days of school the month prior to the administration of assessments scored much lower than their counterparts who missed only a few days or maintained perfect attendance. “The analysis contributes to mounting evidence that absenteeism puts students at greater risk of poor academic achievement and eventually dropping out of high school” (Sparks, 2012, p. 13).

Studies indicate that students who are habitually tardy to class or frequently cut class are more likely to experience academic failure and increase the likelihood of dropping out of school.

Skipping class also increased students’ likelihood of having poor educational outcomes: compared with students who never cut class, students who reported that they occasionally cut (less than once per week) were twice as likely to perform below the basic proficiency level in math and more than one and a half times as likely to do so in reading. (Kaufman, Bradbury, & Owings, 1992, p. 32)

Student engagement is more than just attention to academic rigor and curricula. Research indicates that students who do “not participate in either extracurricular activities in school or other organized activities out of school also had significantly higher odds of dropping out of school” (Rumberger, 1995, p. 604).

Student Mobility

Student mobility is a factor that contributes to a student dropping out of school.

While student mobility permeates all communities, it is particularly devastating to some of the most vulnerable children in our society, including homeless children, foster youth, children from low-income and single-parent households, migrant

students, youth in juvenile correctional facilities, and children of military families. (Weisman, 2012, p. 527)

One study determined that students who changed both their residences and schools were more likely than their non-mobile counterparts to drop out of school.

Mobile students' comparatively lower levels of academic performance and their poorer relationships with their schools, as indicated by infrequent participation in extracurricular activities and low levels of school engagement, also explain a small portion of the apparent effect of student mobility on school dropout. (South, Haynie, & Bose, 2007, p. 91)

This same study revealed that mobile students not only had an increased risk for dropping out of school, but students who were non-mobile students in schools that had a high percentage of students who were mobile tended to have a greater chance of dropping out of school than students who attended schools with a stable population.

In a study initiated by the National Center for Education Statistics revealed the following in regards to student dropouts and mobility.

Changing schools also had a significant relationship to dropping out: the odds of dropping out steadily rose as the number of school changes increased. After adjusting for SES, race-ethnicity, and sex, students who had changed schools once were 80 percent more likely to drop out, while students who had changed schools twice were more than twice as likely to drop out as students who had never changed schools. Students who had changed schools five times or more during their first eight grades of schooling were more than eight times as likely to drop

out as those students who had never changed schools. (Kaufman et al., 1992, p. 14)

Behavioral Issues

Persistent behavioral issues serve as another factor that leads to students electing to drop out of high school (Suh & Suh, 2007, p. 302). “Acting up in school, particularly if these behaviors result in repeated suspensions or an expulsion, can increase a student’s alienation from school” (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 13). Students who frequently miss quality instructional time as a result of discipline referrals fall behind in academic achievement. One study suggests that the average classroom discipline referral results in students missing on average 20 minutes or more of instructional time (Scott & Barrett, 2004, p. 22). Studies suggest that discipline referrals and suspensions for minority students are disproportionate when compared to white students (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008).

One study identified that aggressive tendencies of students accompanied by lower levels of academic performances were serious factors that contributed to the potential for students to drop out of high school. “Each of the factors taken alone – aggressiveness, doing poorly in school subjects, being older than peers – contributed to the likelihood of dropping out. But it is the combination of these factors that had the strongest relation to early dropout” (Cairns, Cairns, & Neckerman, 1989, p. 1448).

Teenage Parenthood

There is an increased risk of students dropping out of high school if they are parents. Studies have determined that this increase in likelihood of dropping out of high school is true for both male and female students who are parents (Cairns et al., 1989, p.

1448). A 2006 study that surveyed dropouts indicated that becoming a parent played a significant role in the student's decision to drop out of high school.

Twenty-six percent of all respondents and one-third of all young women we surveyed said that becoming a parent was a major factor in their decision to leave school. Many young women who became pregnant were unable to juggle the pressures of young motherhood and school, so they dropped out. (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 6)

A 2010 study, initiated by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, identified additional challenges, not only for the teenage mother, but for her child as well.

As Americans, we believe that every child should have a shot at achieving their full potential: getting a good education, securing a job that pays well, and raising a family of their own. But not all children have these opportunities. Teenage childbearing can have long-term negative effects on both the adolescent mother and the newborn. Babies born to teen mothers are at higher risk of being low birthweight and preterm. They are also far more likely to be born into families with limited educational and economic resources, which function as barriers to future success. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010b, p. 26)

High School Dropout Prevention Initiatives and Strategies

Researchers have completed comprehensive studies on dropout prevention in the following areas: (a) best practices, (b) interventions, and (c) strategies. Many common themes appear in the research literature. For instance, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2012a) recently published a list of effective strategies in reducing dropouts. These strategies were divided into four major areas: School and Community

Perspective; Early Interventions; Basic Core Strategies; and Making the Most of Instruction (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2012a, p. 1-2).

This literature review focuses primarily on high school dropout interventions and strategies with a particular emphasis on the role of adult advocates. Research suggests that practitioners possess a range of program options to select from when addressing the dropout dilemma. In this program selection process, research emphasizes the need for practitioners to be keenly aware of the varying risk factors associated with their student populations.

Once risk factors are identified, practitioners face the decision of which program or programs to implement to address these factors. One option is for practitioners to select from among the number of quality evidence-based programs already proven to address particular risk factors. Another option is for program planners to develop their own programs using components and strategies incorporated in best practices as a guide. (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 47)

Understanding that many students experience more than one risk factor at a time is important for practitioners to recognize and implement appropriate intervention strategies.

A number of lessons can be gleaned from the research on risk factors and evidence-based programs for practitioners implementing either existing programs or developing new ones. First, multiple risk factors should be addressed wherever possible to increase the likelihood that the program will produce positive results. Research clearly shows that the likelihood of dropping out increases with multiple risk factors and that the effects of these factors may snowball over time. Programs

should take this into account and target as many factors as possible. (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 48)

Research indicates that no one dropout program or strategy will work with all students. Numerous programs and initiatives exist to address various factors that affect students and influence them to stay in school and not drop out. A study conducted in 2007 by the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network at Clemson University identified 50 exemplary programs that address various risk factors associated with dropouts. The report noted, “whether adopting an existing program or developing a new one, practitioners need to use evidence-based strategies to evaluate programs to assure effectiveness” (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 8).

Across the Nation, students at risk of dropping out enter high school without prior support and then encounter uncharted challenges associated with a high school environment. It is common for high school staff members to blame the students’ current challenges on their lack of preparation for high school or their attitudes towards learning during earlier educational experiences. Students are better served if high school staff members recognize the challenges that accompany students entering high school and “not just wish they had different ones” (Levin, 2012, p. 21).

School-Wide Reform

In order to ensure the success of all students in the 21st century, high schools and school systems need to be in a continuous state of improvement. The needs of every student must be a priority. One author describes this effort as systemic renewal.

Systemic renewal is about continuous, critical inquiry into current practices, identifying innovations that might improve education, removing organizational

barriers to that improvement, and providing a system structure that supports change. Systemic renewal necessitates creating a flexible, responsive organization that enables teachers, school administrators, students, parents and community members to collaborate in providing within each school the experiences students need to achieve academic success. (Duttweiler, 2004, p. 56)

A study on reading completed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation stressed the critical importance of systemic school reform efforts in order to support the needs of all students.

Prioritize, support, and invest in results-driven initiatives to transform low-performing schools into high-quality teaching and learning environments in which all children, including those from low-income families and high-poverty neighborhoods, are present, engaged, and educated to high standards. (Annie E. Casey Foundation, 2010a, p. 32)

Ninth Grade Transition Support

While many factors that influence dropouts, such as poor attendance or low grades, manifest themselves in elementary and middle school, high schools have the opportunity to identify entering students who are demonstrating risk factors and initiate immediate support with the aim of promoting academic success. High school staff members need to recognize the challenges students experience when transitioning from middle school to high school. Furthermore, staff must prepare to support those incoming students who demonstrate risk factors attributed to potential dropouts. The transition from middle school to high school often brings life changes. Parents of ninth grade children tend to afford their children increased autonomy while their children seek greater

independence. Some ninth grade students experience difficulty acclimating to the social norms of a high school environment. Difficulty with the ninth grade transition quickly reveals itself in students who are not adequately prepared with the skills and knowledge to be successful in ninth grade course work (Neild, 2009).

Ninth grade is a treacherous year for students, particularly those in large urban districts. Even students who were doing moderately well in the middle grades can be knocked off the path to graduation by the new academic demands and social pressures of high school. Among students who sent their first serious distress signal in 9th grade, those who earned fewer than two credits or attended school less than 70 percent of the time had at least a 75 percent chance of dropping out of school. Most of these students did not drop out immediately but attempted 9th grade courses for another one or two years before finally giving up on school altogether. (Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007, p. 30)

Preparing students to be successful during the transition from middle school to high school requires the efforts of the students, parents, and the school system staff.

In a broad sense, the task of helping ninth graders to succeed requires the serious efforts of educators at the pre-K through eighth-grade level to prepare students for the academic requirements of ninth grade; it also requires the involvement of parents in the supervision and support of their children. But, ultimately, it is high schools that bear the most immediate responsibility for putting in place the curriculum, school organizational features, and strong teachers who will increase a ninth grader's chances of making a good transition to high school. (Neild, 2009, p. 72)

Student Engagement

Dropout is less likely when students are actively engaged in the high school experience. Studies have revealed that student involvement in career planning is an effective method for increasing student engagement and enhancing their attitude toward school. “Higher levels of career planfulness and expectations at the beginning of the year were associated with increases in school engagement over the course of the year” (Kenny, Blustein, Haase, Jackson, & Perry, 2006, p. 272). It is vital for counselors and other adults to: (a) connect students with resources that promote high levels of academic engagement, (b) assist students with setting career goals, and (c) help establish expectations for graduation.

One study suggests “that intervention programs geared toward enhancing school engagement among adolescents should incorporate strategies to facilitate self-efficacy and goal orientation and to reduce fear of failure” (Caraway, Tucker, Reinke, & Hall, 2003, p. 426). The accomplishment of this task requires all members of the school community to provide identified students with ongoing positive reinforcement and feedback.

Early Identification

Given the comprehensive research on predictors of dropping out of school, educators should carefully analyze all available student data and information to ensure early identification of potential dropouts.

Schools need to develop district-wide (or even state-wide) early warning systems to help them identify students who they anticipate are less likely to succeed in the school where they are. This will not only serve those who stay in one school, but

will help those students who transfer from school to school to make sure they do not get lost in the various systems in which they are enrolled. Mechanisms need to be developed to ensure such warning systems trigger the appropriate support and provide follow through until the student is back on track. (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 15)

Adult Advocacy

School-based adult advocates for students can support student success in high school. Failure to provide students with support of this nature often results in students not graduating from high school.

Students say over and over again that the most important factor in deciding whether they come to school, stay in school, or leave school is whether anyone in that institution knows who they are and cares about what happens to them. This is one of the clearest findings in all the research on secondary education. (Levin, 2012, pp. 35-36)

Educators must closely monitor the academic performance of every student in order to ensure graduation. As performance concerns emerge, adults need to intervene immediately to prevent graduation derailment. Historically, high school counselors have the responsibility of monitoring student performance and progress towards graduation requirements. However, given the high student-to-counselor ratio in many schools, monitoring the academic performance of all students is a challenge.

The range of programs and supports can be overwhelming and finding the right supports a challenge. Since research shows the value of having an adult at the school who is involved with and familiar with the student, we believe more

schools should consider developing adult advocacy programs within the school environment. (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 15)

Ben Levin (2012), the author of More High School Graduates, indicates that no one dropout intervention strategy will work with all students. He identifies the following adult responsibilities and strategies to provide individualized support and care for students at-risk of dropping out of school:

- There is at least one staff member who knows something about each student – her or his character, family background, orientation toward learning, life outside the school, educational history, interests, and personal challenges.
- The school knows the current academic status of all students, including course choice and progress in those courses.
- An organized system is in place to identify all students who are struggling in a course.
- An organized process of intervention takes place when a student is identified as struggling.
- There are various mechanisms to help students get back on track toward on-time graduation. (Levin, 2012, p. 46)

While many educators can support potential dropout students, the National Middle School Association recommends that each student should have an adult specifically assigned to him or her.

Each student must have one adult to support that student's academic and personal development. This adult is a model of good character who is knowledgeable

about young adolescent development in general, who self-evidently enjoys working with young adolescents, and who comes to know students well as individuals. Advocates or advisors are not counselors, but they listen and guide youth through the ups and downs of school life. Young adolescents have many concerns about matters that lie outside the parameters of the academic curriculum, and they need opportunities to discuss these with one another and a trusted adult. (National Middle School Association, 2005, para. 2)

Credit Recovery

High school students who are failing courses or have already failed courses need an opportunity to reestablish themselves in terms of earning graduation requirements. This is true for students who are currently enrolled in high school and for students returning to high schools after dropping out. “The standards for credit recovery should be no less taxing than are the standards for any other course credit” (Levin, 2012, p. 80).

Credit rescue usually refers to situations in which the student is struggling while the course is still ongoing, whereas credit recovery refers to courses for which the student has already received a failing grade. In both situations, schools need to assign staff and time to support students so they can complete the work and gain the knowledge necessary to receive the credit. Given the strong relationship between failing a course and failing to graduate, efforts to keep students on track to graduation are vital in every school. (Levin, 2012, p. 79)

Parent Involvement

Lack of parental involvement in their child’s education can contribute to students dropping out of high school. Educators must attempt to engage parents in their child’s

education, especially when signs of a potential student dropout emerge. “Schools can improve dropout behavior by trying to address parenting practices – especially those that directly involve the school, such as participating in the PTA and attending school events and meetings” (Rumberger, 1995, p. 618).

Dropouts believe that increased parental involvement would have supported their efforts to graduate. Communication is a two-way street and parents need to share in their part of the responsibility, yet schools need to do their share by initiating and increasing communication efforts with parents. A 2006 survey of dropouts determined the following.

Seventy-one percent of young people surveyed felt that one of the keys to keeping students in school was to have better communication between the parents and the school, and increasing parental or guardian involvement in their child’s education. Less than half said their school contacted their parents or themselves when they were absent (47 percent) or when they dropped out (48 percent). Respondents suggested that increased parental involvement could influence very basic things – such as ensuring students came to school every day and attended their classes. (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. 13)

Schools and school systems can reach out to parents in a variety of methods, including the use of adult advocates or advisors for students.

The advisor is the primary liaison between the school and family and often initiates contact with parents, providing pertinent information about the student’s program and progress, as well as being ready to receive calls from any parent with a concern. Helping families stay engaged in their child’s education is a critical

task. Students seeking independence often prefer to keep home and school separate, but a high quality of three-way communication will ensure that students, their parents, and the advisor will be mutually supportive. (National Middle School Association, 2005, para. 3)

Before schools and school systems can solicit the assistance of parents in their child's education, they need to recognize that barriers exist that must be overcome.

Schools and school systems which are successfully involving families begin by responding to the qualities, characteristics, and needs of the parents in order to overcome the barriers which interfere with communication. These barriers include parents' level of literacy; language preferred for reading, listening, speaking, and writing; daily commitments and responsibilities that may affect the time, energy, and attention available to devote to school; and parents' level of comfort in becoming involved in their children's education. (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2012b, para. 3)

Community Involvement

Community involvement in school and dropout prevention initiatives is essential to addressing the dilemma. "For any school program to assure the high academic achievement of all children, there must be an active partnership between the school and community to address the social and personal, as well as the academic, needs of children" (Drew, 2004, p. 65). "When all groups in a community provide collective support to the school, a strong infrastructure sustains a caring environment where youth can thrive and achieve" (Reimer & Smink, 2005, p. 8).

High School Principals as Instructional Leaders

Principal Influence

For the purposes of this study, it is critical to identify the influence a principal has on the overall effectiveness or lack of effectiveness in a school. Principals impact school culture, operation, instruction, reform, and vision. Tomlinson and Allan (2000) indicate that school-level leaders serve as key players in systemic change (p. 41). The principal's perception regarding the effectiveness of any program matters to its implementation, sustainability, and continuation.

Teachers and other staff members are frequently credited with student achievement results, but principals are important as well. It is

“extremely important and largely overlooked leadership that schools need and that, in most schools, only principals are able to deliver. Successful leaders improve learning in their schools in many ways. Improving instruction will always be important but it is by no means the only influence on student achievement. (Leithwood, Patten, & Jantzi, 2010, p. 698)

Because of the principals' influence on instruction and other programs related to student achievement their perceptions and attitudes relating to the student intervention specialist position matter.

Evolving Role of the Principal

Now more than ever, high school principals are accountable for both the day-to-day operation of their buildings and student achievement, including reducing the number of dropouts and increasing graduation rates.

The principal's role has evolved significantly over the past few decades. In addition to retaining the largely managerial responsibilities of the past, today's principals are expected to lead school improvement, increase student learning, and help staff grow professionally. In other words, the principalship has become far more complex. (Strong, 2013, p. 61)

This new, complex role for the principal involves the development of talents and leadership skills of the individual staff members of the school. Understanding how to maximize the human resources available and pull those resources together to accomplish a common goal is critical to the success of a principal in reaching established student achievement expectations.

The job of administrative leaders is primarily about enhancing the skills and knowledge of people in the organization, creating a common culture of expectations around the use of those skills and knowledge, holding the various pieces of the organization together in a productive relationship with each other, and holding individuals accountable for their contributions to the collective result. (Elmore, 2000, p.15)

Principal as the Leader of Accountability

The changing role of high school principals and the changing needs of students require a sense of urgency and unwavering focus on student learning and achievement. Without this sense of urgency concentrating on student learning, schools will not meet the needs of all students, especially those at risk of dropping out.

The principals of tomorrow's schools must be instructional leaders who possess the requisite skills, capacities, and commitment to lead the accountability parade,

not follow it. Excellence in school leadership should be recognized as the most important component of school reform. Without leadership, the chances for systemic improvement in teaching and learning are nil. (Tirozzi, 2001, p.438)

Principal's Role in Intervention

Administrators have the responsibility to evaluate the effectiveness of various programs within their buildings. Principals are regularly solicited with advertisements and promotions of dropout prevention programs that may or may not address the needs of their students. Instructional leaders are tasked with selecting programs that result in successful outcomes for their students. One U.S. Department of Education study noted the following. "Many of these practitioners have seen interventions, introduced with great fanfare as being able to produce dramatic gains, come and go over the years, yielding little in the way of positive and lasting change" (U.S. Department of Education, 2003, p. iii).

Effective principals use available resources as a force multiplier to meet the needs of students. Principals need to regularly reevaluate the use of instructional resources, staffing, and programs to meet the needs of children. This reevaluation is true of intervention strategies for at-risk students as well. "Turning around low-performing schools is not just a matter of having lots of interventions, but making certain that the interventions are effective" (Duke & Salmonowicz, 2010, p. 55).

In addition to evaluating intervention programs, high school principals must make personnel decisions in the best interest of all students including purposeful hiring of staff and staff evaluations. "Personnel decisions involve judgments about individual staff members, including their assignments, job status and effectiveness" (Duke &

Salmonowicz, 2010, p. 44). Personnel decisions of this nature are relevant to the relationship between high school principals and positions like that of student intervention specialist.

Summary

Extensive research has documented that individuals who fail to minimally graduate from high school will statistically encounter significant challenges in the 21st century. “Dropouts are much more likely than their peers who graduate to be unemployed, living in poverty, receiving public assistance, in prison, on death row, unhealthy, divorced, and single parents with children who drop out from high school themselves” (Bridgeland et al., 2006, p. i).

As highlighted in the literature, numerous factors can contribute to the likelihood of an individual being at risk of dropping out of high school.

What the studies show is that failure to graduate is usually the result of a whole set of influences that affect children from early in their lives through their entire school careers. As many researchers describe it, failing to graduate, or “dropping out”, is a process, not an event. (Levin, 2012, p. 16)

A range of strategies and intervention practices exist to support students at risk of dropping out of high school. Some of these strategies and intervention practices have proven more promising than others. The research clearly indicates that no one strategy, practice, or program will work with every student. A key finding in the literature review noted, “whether adopting an existing program or developing a new one, practitioners need to use evidence-based strategies to evaluate programs to assure effectiveness” (Hammond et al., 2007, p. 8).

As indicated earlier in this chapter, the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2012a) published a comprehensive list of effective, research-based strategies for reducing the number of high school dropouts. Throughout this literature review, multiple research studies confirm similar highly effective strategies and intervention techniques for reducing student dropouts. Based on the commonalities among the research studies, the researcher used terminology from the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network to develop Table 2.1. The table summarizes the notable parallels between the selected effective, research-based strategies and the current job description for High School Dropout Prevention Intervention Services Specialist, commonly referenced as student intervention specialist.

The information in Table 2.1 is cited from the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network website on “Effective Strategies for Dropout Prevention” (National Dropout Prevention Center/Network, 2012a) and the “Role Responsibilities” identified in the job description for High School Dropout Prevention Intervention Services Specialist.

Table 2.1

Notable Parallels Between Effective Dropout Prevention Strategies and Current Job Responsibilities of Student Intervention Specialists

Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Descriptors of Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Parallel Role Responsibilities From Student Intervention Specialist Job Description
School-Community Collaboration	When all groups in a community provide collective support to the school, a strong	Develop effective relationships with community service providers, youth agencies and local committees in order to facilitate access of supplemental

Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Descriptors of Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Parallel Role Responsibilities From Student Intervention Specialist Job Description
Safe Learning Environments	<p>infrastructure sustains a caring supportive environment where youth can thrive and achieve.</p> <p>A safe learning environment provides daily experiences, at all grade levels, that enhance positive social attitudes and effective interpersonal skills in all students.</p>	<p>resources for students and families.</p> <p>Meet regularly with targeted students to build relationships and understand individual needs. Assist students in reducing absenteeism, improving grades and reducing discipline referrals. Participate in effective behavioral and conflict management/resolution efforts. Maintain confidentiality of student information.</p>
Family Engagement	<p>Research consistently finds that family engagement has a direct, positive effect on children's achievement and is the most accurate predictor of a student's success in school.</p>	<p>Meet regularly with targeted students to build relationships and understand individual needs. Develop effective working relationships with families through correspondence, school and phone conferencing and home visits. Participate in transitional processes, including intakes and transfers. Serve as active participant in school Student Support Team meetings to help develop and implement appropriate strategies and interventions.</p>
Mentoring/ Tutoring	<p>Mentoring is a one-to-one caring, supportive relationship between a mentor and a mentee that is based on trust.</p>	<p>Meet regularly with targeted students to build relationships and understand individual needs. Provide case management and intervention for identified students.</p>

Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Descriptors of Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Parallel Role Responsibilities From Student Intervention Specialist Job Description
Alternative Schooling	Alternative schooling provides potential dropouts a variety of options that can lead to graduation, with programs paying special attention to the student's individual social needs and academic requirements for a high school diploma.	<p>Assist students in reducing absenteeism, improving grades and reducing discipline referrals. Collaborate with school-based personnel in order to advocate for students and provide meaningful interventions.</p> <p>Help to facilitate efforts to ensure smooth transition for students from middle school to high school. Arrange for individual academic support as needed.</p>
After-School Opportunities	Many schools provide after-school and summer enhancement programs	<p>Implement school-based dropout prevention efforts.</p> <p>Provide case management and</p>

Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Descriptors of Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Parallel Role Responsibilities From Student Intervention Specialist Job Description
	that eliminate information loss and inspire interest in a variety of areas.	intervention for identified students. Collaborate with school-based personnel in order to advocate for students and provide meaningful interventions. Arrange for individual academic support as needed. Monitor credits earned, SSL hour completion, completer requirements and any credit recovery needs for graduation. Assist in the coordination and supervision of special activities.
Individualized Instruction	Each student has unique interests and past learning experiences. An individualized instructional program for each student allows for flexibility in teaching methods and motivational strategies to consider these individual differences.	Meet regularly with targeted students to build relationships and understand individual needs. Provide case management and intervention for identified students. Assist students in reducing absenteeism, improving grades and reducing discipline referrals. Collaborate with school-based personnel in order to advocate for students and provide meaningful intervention. Arrange for individual academic support as needed.

Note. Effective strategies and descriptors selectively quoted from National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2012a). Other highly effective dropout prevention strategies from the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network were not used because they related only to teachers and not to non-teaching positions like the student intervention specialists or early childhood education. Responsibilities associated with student intervention specialist job description selectively quoted from Appendix A.

Many of the responsibilities in the current job description of the student intervention specialist, directly or indirectly, align with many of the researched-based effective dropout prevention strategies. As noted in Chapter I, the primary question of this study was: Based on principals' perceptions, what is the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates? In order for any school-based intervention to be successful, it is important that the principal support the program or position and its intended outcome. This study focuses on the principals' perceptions about the ideal role and responsibilities of the position and how it can be used effectively to reduce dropouts and increase graduation rates. The study purposefully does not focus on the implementation of the resource by each principal. This topic could be part of further study and should remain confidential in the event the research disclosed personnel issues or the need for disciplinary actions.

Chapter III describes the researcher's methodology for conducting the study and determining the high school principals' perceptions regarding the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates.

CHAPTER III

Methodology

Chapter I described the importance of this study to high school dropout prevention efforts related to student intervention specialist positions in the system. The primary question of this study was: Based on principals' perceptions, what is the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates?

Chapter II provided a comprehensive literature review that included (a) national statistics associated with student dropout and graduation; (b) challenges facing high school dropouts; (c) factors contributing to student dropout; (d) successful strategies that promote student graduation and prevent students from dropping out of high school; and (e) the role of high school principals as instructional leaders. The chapter connected relevant literature with many of the high school dropout prevention efforts implemented in the system, including the current job description of the high school dropout prevention intervention services specialist, commonly referenced as student intervention specialist.

Chapter III describes the research design and methodology used to answer the primary question. This chapter is divided into seven sections including: (a) background; (b) research approach; (c) participants; (d) interview protocols and data collection; (e) analysis processes and procedures; (f) limitations of the study, and (g) summary of methodology.

Background

According to official data from the Maryland State Department of Education (2012a), the system has the 11th largest student enrollment population out of the 24

school systems in Maryland, serving over 22,000 students with approximately 3,000 employees. The public school students in the county are educated at 46 sites including schools and programs at other locations within the county.

In the early 1990s the system utilized grant funds to support a program known as Maryland's Tomorrow at two urban high schools. The Maryland's Tomorrow grant funded full-time positions to support a limited number of students who were identified as at risk of dropping out of high school. When the grant funds ended, the school system funded 2.4 new positions in its fiscal year 2004 (FY04) operating budget in order to establish the student intervention specialist positions permanently. The number increased to five full-time equivalent positions in FY05, six positions in FY06, and 8.5 positions in FY08. Currently, the total number of high school student intervention specialists is nine, including one position supported by Title I, Part D, Neglected, Delinquent, and At-Risk Youth Grant funds.

In addition to increasing the number of positions and the number of schools and students who the student intervention specialists served, the school system revised the job description several times during this time period. The most recent changes occurred in 2007. The employees in the student intervention specialist positions are paid on the Educational Support Personnel salary scale as a Grade 10, 7-hour, 10-month work-year employee. These non-certificated positions do not require a four-year degree, but do require the individuals to meet the highly qualified status established by the federal government for a paraprofessional in Title I schools.

For the purposes of this study and the interviews conducted with principals, the researcher used the Code of Maryland Regulations 13A.08.01.07(C)(1) description of a dropout.

A student who terminates the student's formal education is a dropout. A dropout is defined as a student who, for any reason other than death, leaves school before graduation or the completion of a Maryland-approved educational program (including a special education program) and is not known to enroll in another school or State-approved program during a current school year. (Division of State Documents, 2012)

Research Approach

This is a qualitative study using a multisite case study approach. “Case studies concern in-depth study of a single or a few programs, events, activities, groups, or other entities defined in terms of time and place” (McMillan, 2008, p. 13).

In contrast to quantitative research, McMillan (2008) describes the qualitative method of research in the following manner.

The assumption guiding interpretive/constructivist research is that reality is socially constructed. Rather than a single objective reality, there are multiple realities, each related to the complexity of naturally occurring behavior, characterized by the perspectives of the participants. A less structured and more interactive mode of data collection is emphasized, and numerical data are used only to provide simple descriptions. The emphasis is on language to most closely reflect participant perspectives. Objectivity is replaced by confirmability. This

approach is better known as a qualitative method of research. (McMillan, 2008, p. 5)

“Qualitative research aims to provide an in-depth understanding of people’s experiences, perspectives and histories in the context of their personal circumstances or settings” (Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis & Dillon, 2003, p. 17). Because high school principals are responsible for the success of all students in their charge, understanding principals’ perceptions, in detail, was important to answering the primary question of this study.

The researcher determined both commonalities and differences in principals’ perceptions and expectations of the role of the student intervention specialist position using face-to-face interviews. As a result, the researcher was able to identify dropout prevention strategies that principals believe are critical responsibilities of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing graduation rates.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the relationships among the research-based highly effective dropout prevention strategies discovered during the literature review, the current student intervention specialist job description, and principal perceptions regarding the role of the student intervention specialist position prior to the researcher conducting interviews and analyzing the responses.

The overlapping area (A) of the circles depicting the research-based highly effective dropout prevention strategies and the current student intervention job description are the notable parallels between the two areas identified in Chapter II, Table 2.1, Notable Parallels Between Effective Dropout Prevention Strategies and Current Job Responsibilities of Student Intervention Specialists. Prior to this study, the researcher could not accurately identify principal perceptions and include them in Figure 3.1.

Therefore, the unknown perceptions prior to the research are depicted by a dotted circle. As a result of the study the principal perceptions can be added to this figure. The relationship between the research-based strategies, the student intervention specialist job description, and principal perceptions are noted in Chapter V as part of Figure 5.1.

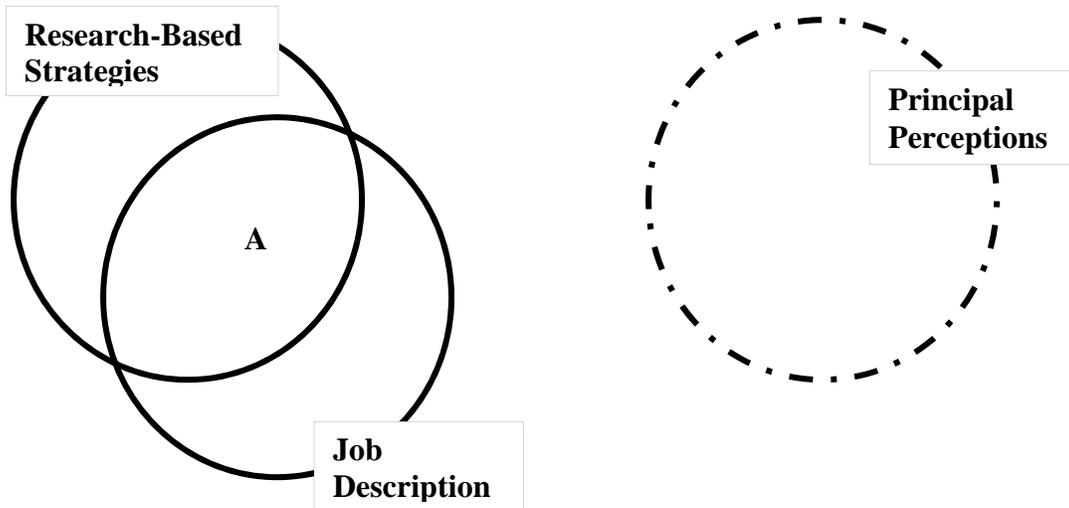


Figure 3.1. Relationship of Highly Effective Dropout Prevention Strategies, Current Student Intervention Specialist Job Description, and Unknown Principal Perceptions Prior to the Research Study

Participants

This multisite case study included detailed interviews with selected high school principals regarding their perceptions of the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates. The researcher sought to determine both commonalities and differences in principals' perceptions and expectations of the student intervention specialist position.

The researcher chose to interview principals for two reasons. Ultimately, a principal is accountable for student achievement for the school, including dropout and graduation rates. The principal also assumes full responsibility for supervising the staff and holding them to the established standards assigned to their positions. To protect the identity of the principals and schools referenced in this study, the researcher used pseudo names.

The school system employs a total of nine student intervention specialists at the high school level. Eight of the 10 high schools in the county have student intervention specialist support. Two high school magnet-like programs in the county have a relatively small number of dropouts and do not require student intervention specialist resources on a regular basis. Two of the smaller high schools, Epsilon High and Delta High, share one student intervention specialist. The two largest high schools in the county are Zeta High and Theta High. Each of these schools employs two student intervention specialists. Gamma High, Eta High, and Kappa High each have one student intervention specialist. One full-time student intervention specialist serves the county’s high school alternative program, Alpha High.

Table 3.1

Student Intervention Specialist Support by School

County High Schools	Official September 30, 2013 Student Enrollment	Number of Student Intervention Specialists	Comments
Alpha High	* 75	1	Alternative program
Beta High	247	0	Support provided by other resources as needed
Gamma High	883	1	
Delta High	501	.5	Shared with Epsilon High

Epsilon	146	.5	Shared with Delta High
Zeta	1312	2	
Eta	799	1	
Theta	1292	2	
Iota	520	0	Support provided by other resources as needed
Kappa	918	1	

*Note. Students assigned to Alpha High transfer in and out of the school throughout the school year. The capacity of the high school is 75 students.

Of the eight high school principals that employ student intervention specialists, the researcher chose a purposeful sampling of four principals for the study.

In purposeful sampling (sometimes referred to as purposive, judgment, or judgmental sampling), the researcher selects particular individuals or cases because they will be particularly informative about the topic. Based on the researcher's knowledge of the population, a judgment is made to include those cases that will be information-rich. (McMillan, 2008, p. 119)

The purposeful sampling included the principals of the following:

- A large enrollment high school with the highest number of dropouts employing two student intervention specialists.
- A medium enrollment high school with the highest number of dropouts employing one student intervention specialist.
- A small enrollment high school with the highest number of dropouts employing a half-time student intervention specialist.
- An alternative school employing one student intervention specialist.

The selected principals are both male and female. As educators they range in experience from 16 years to 20 years. As administrators they range in experience from eight years to 14 years. All of the selected principals have served the school system in

capacities other than being a high school principal. These include roles as teachers, assistant principals, middle school principals, and central office supervisors. The participants have been in their current high school principal positions between one and three years. Each of the selected principals has worked with a student intervention specialist in some capacity between two and eight years. All of the principals have master's degrees and some are pursuing higher levels of education.

The schools that the selected principals currently serve vary not only in size, from a few students to over a 1,000 students, but also in other demographic measures. The schools' free and reduced meal student participation rates range between approximately 35 and 65 percent. The white to non-white student percentages range between 55 percent white to over 90 percent white and between 45 percent non-white to less than ten percent non-white. The mobility rate, measuring the combined percentages of students who enter and withdraw during a school year, range between less than ten percent to over 20 percent. From the cohort of the most recent graduating class, the number of dropouts from the selected schools ranged between less than 10 students to slightly more than 50 students. The graduation rates ranged between approximately 80 percent to more than 93 percent.

Principals attend district-level professional development training on a wide range of research-based dropout prevention strategies. Based on their training and experiences, the purposefully selected principals were prepared to offer thoughtful responses to the interview questions regarding the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing the number of dropouts and increasing graduation rates.

Each principal received a personalized invitation to participate in the study (see Appendix B). The invitation to participate in the study included the following: (a) intent of the study, (b) its purpose in terms of doctoral requirements associated with the University of Maryland, and (c) a brief overview of the interview process. Prior to principals agreeing to participate in the study, the researcher provided protocols for the interview process and expectations regarding confidentiality.

Participating in the study was optional, respecting the principal's decision to participate or not participate. The researcher offered no incentives to the participants in the study. At any point principals could have elected to discontinue participation in the study. Since no principals withdrew from the study, the researcher included all relevant data collected from the participants. The study notes the number of principals that completed the process, including written permission to use the confirmed survey responses.

Interview Protocols and Data Collection

The researcher developed interview questions based on the literature review, research findings, and the current student intervention specialist job description. The interviewer's goal was to collect relevant information regarding the principals' perceptions of the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing the number of dropouts and increasing the graduation rate.

Interviews are used to gather information that cannot be obtained from field observations, and to verify observations. Their purpose is to explain the participants' point of view, how they think and how they interpret and explain their behavior within a given setting. (McMillan, 2008, p. 281)

Prior to beginning the study, the researcher secured permission from the researcher's dissertation committee and fulfilled all of the requirements of the University of Maryland Institutional Review Board. Additionally, the researcher fulfilled the requirements for conducting a study in the system. The superintendent and supervising staff of high school principals were fully informed and granted permission and support for the study. Each principal signed a form consenting to participate in the study and giving the researcher permission to use his or her responses and collected data for the intended purpose (see Appendix C).

A central office staff member who possesses knowledge and experience with the role of the student intervention specialist reviewed a draft copy of the interview questions. His recommendations were considered and incorporated in the final set of questions.

The researcher used semi-structured questions for the survey instrument. "Semistructured questions do not have predetermined, structured choices. Rather, the question is open-ended yet specific in intent, allowing individual responses" (McMillan, 2008, p. 177). The researcher asked each participant to respond to the following interview questions in order to determine the answer to the primary research question of this study: Based on principals' perceptions, what is the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates?

1. From your perspective, what should the ideal role of the student intervention specialist be in maximizing efforts to reduce the number of dropouts and increase graduation rates?

2. From your perspective, how has the student intervention specialist contributed to limiting the number of dropouts in your school?
3. From your perspective, how would you change the role and responsibilities of the student intervention specialist to further reduce the number of students dropping out of school?
4. From your perspective, what professional development opportunities would further enhance the role of the student intervention specialist, thus resulting in a decline in the number of students dropping out of school?
5. From your perspective, in a school system with limited resources, do you consider the student intervention specialist position a wise investment for the purpose of limiting the number of dropouts and increasing the graduation rate? Why or why not?

The principal chose the most convenient and comfortable location for the face-to-face interview. The interviews took place during August 2013. The researcher obtained permission from the superintendent to conduct the interviews during the principal's workday because of the study's relevance to the district. Each interview lasted approximately one and a half hours. To ensure the reliability and validity of the study, all participants were asked the same questions in the same order and were free to respond to the researcher's queries as they determined appropriate. The questions were purposefully designed to initiate information-rich responses from principals. The researcher asked follow-up questions, as appropriate, to verify the principals' responses or to elicit additional information relevant to the study.

The researcher transcribed the principal interviews verbatim from electronic recordings. After reviewing the transcripts, the researcher paraphrased the principals' responses to each question, providing coherent answers for future readers. The principals received drafts of the paraphrased responses for amendments, additions, and editing to ensure the responses were interpreted accurately.

Analysis Processes and Procedures

To ensure confidentiality the researcher randomly assigned an identifying letter to each case study and principal. Confirmed paraphrased responses to each question from each principal were organized to facilitate data analysis.

For the purposes of analysis, the researcher collectively examined the responses from all principals, question by question. The researcher documented emerging patterns and common themes from the interview questions regarding the perceptions of the high school principals. After a peer reviewer had confirmed the accuracy of the identified patterns and themes, the researcher determined the conclusions of the study. Highlighted in the final report are principals' perceptions of the role of the student intervention specialist in lowering the number of dropouts and increasing graduation rates and other relevant findings from the study. During the study period, the researcher secured all electronic recordings and draft responses.

Limitations of the Study

One must recognize and acknowledge the advantages and precautions of researching in one's own district and also the possible limitations. Due to the researcher's job responsibilities in the district, he exercised caution to avoid biases from both the researcher and the participants.

The ideal role of the interviewer is to act as a neutral medium through which information is transmitted. The interviewer should not have an effect on the results, except to make it possible for the subject to reveal information that otherwise would not have been known. (McMillan, 2008, p. 178)

One of the most significant advantages to conducting research in one's own district is the availability of information, access to participants and, in this case, the cordial relationship enjoyed between the researcher and the participants.

The researcher acknowledges a passion for helping students stay in school, prepare for their future, and graduate. In former roles at the school system's administrative office, the researcher held positions that directly supervised high school principals. While in those positions, the system implemented many interventions to support student graduation. The student intervention specialist position was just one of those intervention efforts.

The researcher continues to have interest in any successful endeavor to support student graduation, including the successful implementation and use of all resources. In the researcher's current role it is necessary to review the use of all resources, pre-kindergarten through 12th grade. The financial investment required to maintain the student intervention specialist position prompts an evaluation. Knowing that the student intervention specialist position had not been formally reviewed since 2007, the researcher selected this topic for study, exercising caution to limit any bias based on his passion for reducing dropouts and increasing graduation rates.

The researcher exercised caution to focus solely on the participant's responses and not lead the participant in any particular direction. The design of the interview

questions was open ended with no intent to elicit a right or wrong response. To limit any misinterpretations or biases on behalf of the researcher, he asked the participants to carefully review their paraphrased responses and revise them as appropriate.

The researcher was not the direct supervisor of any of the principals that participated in the study. The study was not an evaluation in any way of the implementation or use of the student intervention specialist by the principal or the job performance of the individuals currently employed by the school system in these positions. Additionally, to further protect the confidentiality of individuals participating in the study and the staff at the school, neither the participants nor their associated schools were specifically identified by name in the study.

Summary of Methodology

The methodology identified for this study was selected to answer the primary question: Based on principals' perceptions, what is the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates? The researcher sought to determine both commonalities and differences in principals' perceptions and expectations of the student intervention specialist position using face-to-face interviews. Through this effort, the researcher determined critical responsibilities of the student intervention specialist position.

The researcher invited four purposefully selected high school principals to participate in the study. The researcher recorded, transcribed, paraphrased, and carefully analyzed responses to the five interview questions. Recurring themes that emerged in the principals' interviews regarding the role of the student intervention specialist were noted. As an outcome of the study, the researcher offered recommendations for refinements of

the role of the student intervention specialist to support efforts to minimize high school dropouts and maximize student graduation rates.

CHAPTER IV

Results and Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine both commonalities and differences in high school principals' perceptions and expectations of the student intervention specialist position in the school system studied. The primary question of the study was: Based on principals' perceptions, what is the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates?

Chapter I describes the importance of the study to high school dropout prevention efforts related to student intervention specialist positions in the system. Chapter II provides a comprehensive literature review that includes national statistics associated with student dropout and graduation; challenges facing high school dropouts; factors contributing to student dropout; successful strategies that promote student graduation and prevent students from dropping out of high school; and the role of high school principals as instructional leaders. Chapter III describes the research design and methodology used to answer the primary question; including research approach, participants, data collection, and analysis processes and procedures.

The purpose of Chapter IV is to present the results and findings of four, face-to-face interviews. They were conducted with purposefully selected high school principals regarding their perceptions of the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing dropout rates and increasing student graduation rates.

Organization of Results and Findings

The results and findings identified in this chapter are a collection of paraphrased responses from the four high school principals regarding their perceptions of the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing dropout rates and increasing student graduation rates. Each principal participated in a face-to-face interview where they were asked the same five questions regarding the role of the student intervention specialist position.

The use of in-depth interviews enabled the researcher to obtain rich, focused data regarding the principals' perceptions of the role of the student intervention specialist. With the principal's permission, all interviews were electronically recorded. The researcher had the recordings transcribed. From the transcriptions, the researcher paraphrased the principals' responses. The principals reviewed the paraphrased information and provided amendments and additions to the information to best reflect their intended response to each question.

The confirmed paraphrased responses and quotes are listed in the following sections. To ensure confidentiality the researcher randomly assigned an identifying letter to each principal. Purposefully minimal information is provided about each school and principal to maintain confidentiality. Following a brief introduction to each case, the paraphrased responses and quotes are organized by the five questions asked during the interview process.

Case Study A

Principal A's responses to each of the five interview questions are paraphrased below. The principal leads a school with one student intervention specialist. The

principal has supervised several different student intervention specialists at multiple locations.

Response to Interview Question One

From your perspective, what should the ideal role of the student intervention specialist be in maximizing efforts to reduce the number of dropouts and increase graduation rates?

Principal A indicated the student intervention specialist needs to “advocate” for students at risk of dropping out. Part of that advocacy includes making “connections” with students and their families. This includes visiting students’ homes and families and making other connections outside of school as appropriate.

The principal described the need for a student intervention specialist to “serve as a role model for students.” The principal stated:

Without such role models in students’ lives, what they see at home is often what they are headed for in life. It is just a vicious cycle in which they are trapped.

Mom and Dad probably did not complete school, or if they did complete school it was not a huge priority. So the role models the students have at home are not necessarily leading them in the right direction, and it is a lot easier for them to give up and just quit than complete school.

Principal A described a student intervention specialist as “a right-hand person to the administration.” The principal shared that the “school administrators cannot spend all of their time focused on potential dropouts, but the student intervention specialist can.” Additionally the principal shared that the student intervention specialist can keep the administration informed of the immediate needs of students. The principal further

described the student intervention specialist as the individual to coordinate the transition of a student at risk of dropping out of school into a school and transferring to another school.

Seeking and securing resources for students like medical and mental health attention was noted as an important function of the student intervention specialist.

They have to help bring the community to them rather than them to the community, because most of these kids and families cannot navigate out there.

They have no clue how to set up a mental health appointment or even who to talk to.

The principal described how this effort could remove a “distraction” that would allow the student to better focus on school and academic success. “They meet them where they are and take them where they need to be.” Connecting students and their families to resources like social workers and other community support services was noted as an important role as well. The principal’s list of securing resources included the student’s next meal and where the student would be sleeping at night. Additionally, the principal believes that the student intervention specialist should aid students in securing proper school clothing and other necessities for being prepared for school.

According to Principal A, part of the ideal role includes identifying students who need additional support as quickly as possible before they fall behind. The principal stated that the student intervention specialist “needed to be a mediator between students and teachers.” Students often do not know how to properly express their academic concerns, or have upset the teacher to the point that the teacher is less responsive to meet the needs of the students. Additionally, it was noted that the student intervention

specialist needed to secure tutoring and other academic supports for the students. “They need to serve as a mentor to the students and support their academic needs to help them be successful.”

Principal A further shared the need for the student intervention specialist to “help students develop a passion for what they want to do in life.” The principal remarked that the student intervention specialist needed to “help students navigate pathways not only to graduation, but to the world beyond high school.” The principal stated:

Many of the students we work with do not have a clue what they want to do after high school, and that is half the problem, because if they do not have a goal to go towards they tend to give up. The student intervention specialist helps students see there are opportunities that exist beyond their current reality.

Supporting a student’s exploration of workforce opportunities, college enrollment, and the cost of living on one’s own were noted as important subjects for the student intervention specialist to understand.

Principal A described the 3 Rs for supporting students at risk of dropping out of school as building relationships with students, increasing the relevance of school for students, and increasing academic rigor. The principal felt the ideal role of a student intervention specialist would be to support students in all three of these areas, particularly building relationships with students. “The student intervention specialist is going to be at the forefront of forging those relationships.”

Principal A identified accountability for student attendance as a primary role for the ideal student intervention specialist in the following statement.

Knowing who is in school and who needs to be in school is extremely important. The student intervention specialist should contact students or their families when students are not in school and take appropriate action to get them to school. They also need to understand that truancy is usually the result of other underlying concerns.

Principal A noted that student intervention specialists need to be active participants in school-wide support teams like the Student Services Team and the Student Assistance Team. The principal stated that the student intervention specialist should be very knowledgeable about all aspects of the students' lives and "bring the whole picture to the table, including what is happening in the family." Principal A noted that "being a participant in a multiple-prong approach to support at-risk students" was important. "Student intervention specialists help with putting a piece of the puzzle together to support students at risk of dropping out of school. They help the student deescalate and move past issues and situations that may arise."

Principal A described one key role of a student intervention specialist as that of a "crisis manager." The principal stated, "The relationship between a student intervention specialist and a student should be such that the specialist might be the best individual to respond when a student is melting down." Additionally, the principal noted that "the student intervention specialist needs to solve a problem before it becomes a problem."

With the new cohort graduation model, the principal noted that the student intervention specialist should provide a key role as the individual that helps "work to get kids back in school that have dropped out." The principal further shared that the student intervention specialist should track each individual in a cohort who has dropped out and

maintain a list of interventions and support strategies used to date with each student.

“They have to track these students with the approach that it is never too late for a student.”

Response to Interview Question Two

From your perspective, how has the student intervention specialist contributed to limiting the number of dropouts in your school?

Principal A stated, “What they do carries a lot of weight in making a difference for students. Without a student intervention specialist we would be losing a lot of kids.”

The student intervention specialist can “be someone that takes a different look at how a kid is going to graduate.” Principal A continued and stated:

I see them as being very creative and thinking outside of the box in determining the next plan that meets the needs of individual students. They need to be risk takers and determine a way that a new plan is going to work.

Principal A has witnessed firsthand, on many occasions, the student intervention specialist who took a different look at how a student was going to graduate and made that plan become a reality. The principal described the need for the student intervention specialist to develop relevant plans and not theoretical or philosophical plans. “The key is not to repeat the same plan that did not work before. Let’s put a plan on the table that is going to work.”

Principal A shared that another way that student intervention specialists have reduced dropouts is by “giving students someone that they can build a relationship with within the school. This relationship is beyond the relationship built by teachers in the classroom.” The principal expressed appreciation for successful student intervention

specialists that were risk takers. “It is important that student intervention specialists walk a fine line to support students in every appropriate way and not go beyond that of being a professional. They must identify and maintain strong boundaries.”

Principal A noted that home visits and the relationships built with families were contributing factors to success with limiting dropouts. Additionally, it was noted that student intervention specialists who work on “real life problems” are successful at meeting the needs of students and helping them graduate.

Response to Interview Question Three

From your perspective, how would you change the role and responsibilities of the student intervention specialist to further reduce the number of students dropping out of school?

Principal A described the need for “more tools in the toolbox” as an important enhancement to the role of the student intervention specialist position. The principal shared the need for more professional development in best practices to reduce dropouts and “stealing ideas” that have worked in other systems as an important means to increase the number of “tools available to student intervention specialists.”

“If they had more resources available at their disposal, I think it would make a difference in their success rate.” Principal A believes that student intervention specialists would be more successful if they had a budget to manage for taxi services for students, for commuter vouchers, medical vouchers, and food resources. “Troubleshooting those roadblocks that come up during the student’s educational experience could prevent students from dropping out.”

Principal A shared that the student intervention specialist should be charged with the responsibility and opportunity to lend technology resources to students. This would provide a means for these students to have computers in their homes, potential free Internet connection to support homework, and remedial resources to support student learning gaps.

The principal believes that if student intervention specialists knew more about how to help students access technology that would enhance the position. The principal recommended that student intervention specialists be the e-learning liaison between at-risk students and teachers. The student intervention specialist could help students “navigate the use of e-learning as a means to recover credits” and “monitor student progress” with the resource.

Principal A stated that the student intervention specialist is a “crucial part of the educational team.” Having said that, the principal further described a concern about how student intervention specialists are viewed by other staff members. The principal stated, “Sometimes the student intervention specialists are not seen as equal with teachers, and their voices are not always heard as they advocate for the needs of students.” The principal stated, “Even as an educational support personnel position, sometimes student intervention specialists need more power to make decisions in the best interest of students over teachers.”

Adding a requirement that student intervention specialists have a “solid background or training in mental health services” was viewed as an important qualification. The principal believes that many of the at-risk students whom the school

serves need access to these resources and a person who understands how to assist students in receiving these services.

Some extension of hours for the student intervention specialist position was offered as a suggested means to enhance the position. The principal believes that it is important that the student intervention specialist have work hours available to them in the summer to support students who are attending summer school or transitioning to a new school and have previously been identified as needing additional support to graduate.

Principal A believes that the new dropout age limit will change the role of the student intervention specialist position.

Keeping students in school beyond 16 and 17 years of age will require more pressure to make connections to students outside of school and keep them coming. Student intervention specialists and other staff will need to make a shift in focus from intervention to graduation planning.

Response to Interview Question Four

From your perspective, what professional development opportunities would further enhance the role of the student intervention specialist, thus resulting in a decline in the number of students dropping out of school?

Principal A stated, “It seems like student intervention specialists work on their own island. They need more collaboration and networking with other student intervention specialists to develop and confirm best practices.” Additionally the principal believes that student intervention specialists need more training on how to effectively “deal with at-risk students” and “different approaches to save students” and help them graduate. “There needs to be a constant expansion of the tools in their toolbox.”

The principal believes that research and training on appropriate national programs and intervention would be effective. “Right now, student intervention specialists are limited to what they can do with e-learning, evening high school, alternative school, and school-wide programs.”

Training in mental health issues was of paramount importance to Principal A. The principal described students’ home lives as a “wreck” and often mental health issues were the roots of either the child’s issues or the family’s, which resulted as a contributing factor to students not graduating. “Some students have home lives that are a wreck -- family members that have died, serious personal issues, and mental health issues to the point that they create behavioral issues in school and the community.”

The principal believes that the change in the law to students needing to be 17 and soon 18 years of age would require extensive training in new methods to “keep kids interested in school. Forcing 17 and 18 years olds to attend school would create new challenges” that student intervention specialists are not prepared to deal with based on the current training.

The elephant in the room is that this new law coming down the pike is going to change the role of the student intervention specialist drastically, and their approach to reaching some of these students’ needs will be different. The option to dropout at 16 is gone. One approach that could help in capturing the interest of students is to help them identify passions and interests early and work towards those passions as part of a graduation plan.

Response to Interview Question Five

From your perspective, in a school system with limited resources, do you consider the student intervention specialist position a wise investment for the purpose of limiting the number of dropouts and increasing the graduation rate? Why or why not?

I do see it as a wise investment. It would even be a better investment if it were part of a bigger initiative of tailored programs for the county, including other approaches to supporting at-risk students in their graduation journey and beyond. Principal A continued by describing the frustration of seeing students graduate without a long-term plan. The principal believes it is important that educational planning and on-the-job training for these students be provided to help them be contributing members of society -- not just graduates.

Saving a kid and getting them to graduate in their cohort, that is a good accomplishment, but I don't think we can be satisfied with that. I think we are really doing students an injustice if they just end up doing what they were going to do if they had dropped out of school.

The principal attributed the success of many graduates to the wise investment in the student intervention specialist position. Principal A further described that others were aware of the success of this resource as well. "All kids and teachers know her role in the building and will seek her out for support."

Case Study B

Principal B's responses to each of the five interview questions are paraphrased below. The principal leads a school that shares one student intervention specialist

between two high schools. The principal has supervised several different student intervention specialists at multiple locations.

Response to Interview Question One

From your perspective, what should the ideal role of the student intervention specialist be in maximizing efforts to reduce the number of dropouts and increase graduation rates?

Principal B described the student intervention specialist role as a “community liaison. If they are visiting a home, they are seen as a noninvasive measure to intervene with issues the student or family might be having.” The principal sees home visits as a vital part of the role of the student intervention specialist and stated not only did this effort support the student, but demonstrated a willingness of the school staff to “meet the parents at a halfway point” in trying to solve various issues.

In addition to being a community liaison, the principal believes the student intervention specialist needs to provide a communication link between students and teachers. “They can talk to teachers to say Jimmy or Johnny is dealing with this situation at home.” Many times “teachers do not realize the situation exists.” With that knowledge, the principal trusts that the teacher and the student intervention specialist can “help support Jimmy or Johnny to be successful in the classroom.” The principal communicated that when student intervention specialists advocate for students, “they walk a thin line with teachers” that already believe they have done more than what should be necessary to support the student.

The principal noted that the student intervention specialist must be an active member of the Student Support Team. “They are a part of that team, so that means they

are not there just to take notes – they are actually there to provide suggestions to support the students.” The principal went on to share that the student intervention specialist can serve as a support to students during a team meeting when the student is called into the meeting. “When a student comes into an SST meeting with four or five staff members around the table, it is kind of intimidating to the student.”

Principal B described the student intervention specialist as a last line of defense when a student is talking about dropping out.

When I hear rumors of a student who is talking about dropping out, I invite the student and the parents into my office for a meeting. I always invite the student intervention specialist to those meetings. At some point, I may even get up and leave the student and parents in my office with the student intervention specialist, so they can discuss possible options for the student.

The principal shared that the student intervention specialist serves as the connection between the student’s home school and Evening High School or alternative programs like Antietam Academy. If the best placement for the student is in one of these alternative locations, the principal noted that the student intervention specialist “can keep tabs on the student’s progress and determine if and when the student may be ready to return to school.” The principal continued by describing the student intervention specialist as the one who “builds a transition plan for students” who are returning from alternative placements.

Principal B said that student intervention specialists are a “critical link and work directly with the Department of Juvenile Justice and the Department of Social Services” to support student success. The principal described the partnership between the student

intervention specialist with these agencies and the pupil personnel workers as a “combined force” to support students and “bridge the gap as they work together in the right direction to make the kid successful.”

Response to Interview Question Two

From your perspective, how has the student intervention specialist contributed to limiting the number of dropouts in your school?

Principal B stated that “any dropout is a bad dropout.” The principal continued by sharing that “any number of dropouts is too high. Student intervention specialists are effective because they never believe that a kid can’t graduate. They always keep it in perspective for the team.”

The principal described the student intervention specialists that are most successful in limiting the number of dropouts are the ones who say “there is another plan – there is something we can do, let’s not give up.” Principal B shared that many dropouts have been saved because a student intervention specialist was “willing to go back into the lion’s den to fight for a student to have one more chance when teachers had become frustrated and were done with the student.”

Principal B perceived, “When student intervention specialists are not part of the process is where you will see the highest number of dropouts in our county.” The principal further noted:

When a student intervention specialist is involved in the process, they can help students who struggle to the finish line for a whole host of reasons. Many of these reasons we would never know about if it weren’t for the student intervention

specialist. Where the student intervention specialist is excluded from the process, you are going to see spikes in the number of dropouts.

Principal B described that the student intervention specialist who advocates for students at school and is “welcomed with open arms” in the community’s most difficult neighborhoods is very successful with reducing dropouts. “I think they are a critical piece of the school when they work with some of our toughest situations, at home and in the community.”

Response to Interview Question Three

From your perspective, how would you change the role and responsibilities of the student intervention specialist to further reduce the number of students dropping out of school?

Principal B responded that sharing a student intervention specialist with another school is very difficult.

This is the first time I have been at a school where it is a shared position, and I would definitely say that is not the best situation. I think they are so passionate about what they do that they are torn about how they will give enough time and energy to either school to meet the needs of students.

The recommendation was to assign a student intervention specialist full time to a school.

The hand you are dealt every day is different. You do not know when situations are going to come up, and it seems when you need the student intervention specialist the most they are at the other school. I think it is very difficult to split that position.

In addition to the challenges for students and the administration with a part-time student intervention specialist, the principal stated, “Some staff members don’t view them as a real part of the school when they are only here part of the time.”

The principal stated a “cost analysis of placing a full-time pupil personnel worker in every high school and putting them in charge of student intervention specialists should be conducted.” The principal saw the pupil personnel worker as a “pseudo principal of student services for all of the high school’s feeder schools” and the student intervention specialist as a key resource in supporting students from early grades to graduation.

Principal B believes that many times student intervention specialists are asked to assume the “position of a counselor.” The principal shared concerns whether this was a realistic expectation of an educational support personnel position as opposed to one of a full-time counselor. “I would like to see the education level for that position change a little bit, but I also understand that that will change the cost as well. I think it is something that needs to be considered.”

The principal stated:

I personally think that the student intervention specialist position is a 12-month position. I just think there is so much that goes on in the summer, with summer school and credit recovery. We can’t afford to not have them here for two months if we are going to be successful with more students.

Response to Interview Question Four

From your perspective, what professional development opportunities would further enhance the role of the student intervention specialist, thus resulting in a decline in the number of students dropping out of school?

Principal B believes that student intervention specialists need targeted staff development at the county level.

The student intervention specialist is lumped into what we do here on staff development days, and often it is not what they need. They really need to meet with other student intervention specialists and pupil personnel workers to discuss what really works for children.

The principal described the need for professional development on best practices and remediation as important to the success of the role of the student intervention specialist.

The principal shared that additional training in legal matters; particularly custody issues would be helpful for student intervention specialists. “It’s pretty important to know what you can say to parents and stepparents without getting the school system in trouble.” Additionally, the principal stated that the student intervention specialist needs to fully understand “student rights in regard to teen pregnancy and what information can and cannot be shared with parents without the student’s permission.” The principal identified training in the area of child abuse and reporting child abuse as another legal matter for professional development.

Principal B described the need for more training in the area of successfully transitioning students between high schools and incarceration or out of district placements as important. “The student intervention specialist plays a critical role in these transitions and additional training in these areas would be good from all aspects.”

The principal also believes that pupil personnel workers should play a greater role in professional development for student intervention specialists.

I feel very strongly about the pupil personnel worker leading professional development for the student intervention specialists that is specific to their assigned school and feeder schools. Even though we all work in the same school system there are different norms, support, and expectations in each school community. This would be vital professional development for not only student intervention specialists, but for teachers, administrators, etc.

Response to Interview Question Five

From your perspective, in a school system with limited resources, do you consider the student intervention specialist position a wise investment for the purpose of limiting the number of dropouts and increasing the graduation rate? Why or why not?

The principal reported:

I think it is a great investment. It's another person that can sit at the table when you are talking about student support, who can take on cases, and have time to invest with some of the most critical needs of students.

The principal continued by listing a variety of supports that student intervention specialists provide to students including shopping with them for clothes, taking them to the Family Center, and "providing lunch money out of their own pocket to help out a student." The principal shared:

I have seen student intervention specialists spend their lunch time with a new student who is terrified to sit in a cafeteria, not because it is crazy, but just because they need someone to talk to. So I think their worth is a bargain as far as I'm concerned.

Case Study C

Principal C's responses to each of the five interview questions are paraphrased below. The principal leads a school that has two student intervention specialists. The principal has supervised several different student intervention specialists at multiple locations.

Response to Interview Question One

From your perspective, what should the ideal role of the student intervention specialist be in maximizing efforts to reduce the number of dropouts and increase graduation rates?

Principal C described the student intervention role as "multifaceted. I think they have to start by being proactive." The principal called the student intervention specialist a "vital link between students and teachers." The principal noted that often a student might be "resistant to talk to a teacher to get help" and thought the student intervention specialist could fill the role as a "connector in that regard."

Once caseloads are established, Principal C identified the need for student intervention specialists "to monitor student progress on a regular basis, not only academically but their attendance, their behavior, the number of credits they are earning, and their student service learning hours."

"I think that they serve as a student advocate and it is important they develop relationships with students and families." Principal C described part of that relationship as "establishing a strong dialogue with the students and their parents."

As students at risk of dropping out of high school transition from school to school, Principal C shared the need for the student intervention specialist to know those

students immediately. “They need to become more familiar with the students at the middle school levels so there is nothing new they need to learn when the students transition into ninth grade.” Additionally, the principal described the need to follow the students’ transitions from grade to grade as being important.

Principal C identified serving on various student support teams in the school as a key role for student intervention specialists. The principal described the need for the student intervention specialist to communicate with teachers, counselors, and pupil personnel workers as being important.

I think to a degree they have to brainstorm with other staff members about creative solutions for some of the challenges our students face, whether it be additional opportunities like evening high school, schedule changes, or some sort of a modification to the student’s day.

The principal shared the need for student intervention specialists “to work on reclaiming dropouts constantly. I think it is really their job to make sure that all resources have been exhausted in order to prevent a drop in the first place.”

Response to Interview Question Two

From your perspective, how has the student intervention specialist contributed to limiting the number of dropouts in your school?

Principal C described the ability to “actively monitor student progress in real time” as being a key to the success of the position. If a student is not progressing towards graduation, “there should be flags or alerts that pop up.” The principal believes the success of the role is dependent on the student intervention specialist’s response to those “flags.”

The principal indicated that giving the students another “connector” in the building, by way of having a student intervention specialist, is a contributing factor to reducing the number of dropouts. “Students need someone that they can trust in the building and that has the time to devote some energy towards them and their needs.”

The principal cited the student intervention specialist’s ability to connect students with community resources to support their individual needs as another contributing factor to reducing the dropout rate. “They are vital in bringing in that community aspect, getting in touch with the parents, talking with community agencies, even arranging transportation to get to and from school.”

The principal noted that tracking what had been done for individual students as an important strategy in the success of the position in reducing dropouts. “They have a pretty extensive list of services and supports that are provided to students and can determine if all resources have been exhausted prior to a student dropping out.”

Response to Interview Question Three

From your perspective, how would you change the role and responsibilities of the student intervention specialist to further reduce the number of students dropping out of school?

As a concern Principal C identified the extensive number of students with whom an individual student intervention specialist is assigned. “The first thing that comes to mind is the need for manageable caseloads.” The principal further shared that many times the student intervention specialists have so many students identified that need support that they cannot help them all as they would like. The principal suggested that

for large schools consideration should be given to having “one student intervention specialist for each grade.”

The principal suggested that if student intervention specialists could have access to a county-owned vehicle, they could visit homes and pickup students. The principal believes that this change in the role of the student intervention specialist would increase contact with the family and increase student attendance and success.

Principal C identified the important need to enhance the role of the student intervention specialist with middle school students to facilitate their transition to high school.

I think they are obviously having conversations with middle school staff, but spending face time down at the middle school with identified students could help in building a foundation of what a student might need to be successful in high school.

The principal further shared that if this could be accomplished as part of the role of student intervention specialists, they would not have to “figure it all out” when the students enter high school.

Principal C believes that student intervention specialists should be 12-month positions. “I think it would be great if they were 12-month.” The principal described the need for student intervention specialists “during the most vulnerable time of the school year, mid-June to the beginning of August, when students are highly mobile, not connected with the school, and probably when they need the most support.” Student intervention specialists could “support students in summer school with continuous services just like we support special education students in the summer.”

Response to Interview Question Four

From your perspective, what professional development opportunities would further enhance the role of the student intervention specialist, thus resulting in a decline in the number of students dropping out of school?

Principal C described the need for training in the area of identifying students at risk of dropping out of school. “They have to be familiar with what are some common or contributing factors that might lead to a student dropping out so they can be more accurate with trying to identify at-risk students, even before they reach high school.”

The principal identified the need for professional development in the area of supporting “reluctant learners.” Additionally it was noted that training in curricula like Ruby Payne’s Framework for Understanding Poverty would be helpful.

Principal C suggested that student intervention specialists could “benefit from more accurate information on community resources to address student challenges.” The principal noted that knowing what resources are available and providing accurate and immediate responses to the needs of students and parents could reduce the dropout rate further.

Response to Interview Question Five

From your perspective, in a school system with limited resources, do you consider the student intervention specialist position a wise investment for the purpose of limiting the number of dropouts and increasing the graduation rate? Why or why not?

“Absolutely, I think it is a very wise investment” was the immediate response of Principal C. “I think that not only is it a wise investment, but I think that most schools could benefit from having additional people in these positions.” The principal shared that

the student intervention specialists “often do not get the accolades that they deserve. The principal continued by stating:

My observation has been that they are constantly busy talking with parents on the phone, checking to see if students are in school, checking to make sure that students are doing their course requirements, making sure that they are not credit deficit, and coming up with creative opportunities in keeping students on track with graduating.

Case Study D

Principal D’s responses to each of the five interview questions are paraphrased below. The principal leads a school with one student intervention specialist. The principal has supervised several different student intervention specialists.

Response to Interview Question One

From your perspective, what should the ideal role of the student intervention specialist be in maximizing efforts to reduce the number of dropouts and increase graduation rates?

Principal D responded:

Well I think that the role of the student intervention specialist is really to work directly with students and staff at a school to help all students have a positive learning experience, so that they are here and meet graduation requirements.

The principal continued by describing the student intervention specialist as having a liaison role. “They build those relationships with students and with parents, and they are vital in sharing information with counselors, administrators, and teachers to help students.”

The principal believes that the student intervention specialist needs to help students defeat the obstacles that many at-risk students experience during school and outside the school day.

Sometimes high school students come in with a lot of challenges and a lot of background or previous experiences that we need to overcome to make it in the short amount of time to prepare for graduation. I think that the student intervention specialist role includes finding innovative solutions once they know what the problems are and get that information about students. I think that the role includes a lot of being creative, individualizing what you are doing based on what each student needs.

The principal explained that the student intervention specialist needs to gain the confidence of students in order to help them. “I think that the student intervention specialist builds a trust with students. Last year I think every time we learned about a pregnant student it was through our student intervention specialist.”

Principal D described the need for a student intervention specialist to monitor identified students’ “attendance on a daily basis. When students are not here, our student intervention specialist joins our pupil personnel worker to do home visits, and they make a lot of phone calls to parents when students are absent as well.”

Additionally, the principal noted the need for ongoing monitoring of students’ grades.

A student intervention specialist needs to help students with academic work.

Sometimes when a student is absent, it is really awkward when they come in the

next day. How do they get those assignments? Do they need a place to go to make up some work?

The principal indicated that the student intervention specialist should follow up with teachers to ensure the student is working in class and has completed all assignments.

The principal shared that the student intervention specialist needs to “recognize who those students are” with a potential to dropout as soon as possible. The principal noted that it is not only those students who “necessarily hit all of those low marks, but you can see that history of a lot of mobility in their background or a lot of different guardians in the student’s record.”

Principal D identified building relationships with students as a key role of the student intervention specialist.

Our student intervention specialist meets with our students before school, lunch time, and after school. The specialist talks to students about what motivates them and then establishes contracts and incentives to help students meet their goals.

The student intervention specialist helps students with everything from clothing to school supplies, to getting them involved in sports.

The principal shared that the student intervention specialist needs to build relationships with parents as well and make school an inviting place for parents.

The student intervention specialist has the ability to invite a parent into the building just like any other staff member, but often the parent will say no to many staff members, based on their own experience when they were in high school. So sometimes, the student intervention specialist has that ability to kind of arrange that visit to the school outside of your standard visit. They have that flexibility to

go beyond the stereotype of coming to the school and sitting down with a bunch of adults in suits and ties around the table.

The principal continued by stating that the student intervention specialist needs to make home visits and provide direct communication to parents that do not have phone or computer access.

Additionally, the principal described the need for a student intervention specialist to build relationships with staff.

I think that the student intervention specialist has to really be able to collaborate well with counselors, assistant principals, and teachers. They have to have a really good relationship with almost everybody on the staff. And they have to be able to work in the same way with different adults as they do with different students.

Response to Interview Question Two

From your perspective, how has the student intervention specialist contributed to limiting the number of dropouts in your school?

The principal responded:

Well, I definitely think that the student intervention specialist has helped us directly with our students who have missed the most amount of school. I can probably name four or five examples just from last school year alone, where students were missing 20-30 days of school, and the student intervention specialist got them back into school. They work with counselors to redesign the student's schedule, including a mix of evening high school, twilight program, and credit recovery in order to make the child realize they could graduate.

The principal stated that the student intervention specialist is often the first one to notice a student's grades or attendance "slipping." Principal D noted that other staff members are attentive in many different areas. "I think that early detection is just a crucial role that is much of the student intervention specialist's focus and has saved a lot of dropouts." The principal added that monitoring missing graduation requirements of juniors and seniors by the student intervention specialist has saved some dropouts.

Principal D stated that the student intervention specialist is often the first one to know when a student is homeless. "I think we all have a pride that we certainly don't go around advertising that you don't have a place to lay your head at night, and that tends to be kept very quiet in this community." The principal believes knowing this type of information because of the relationships that student intervention specialists have built with students is a contributing factor to students graduating. "They find out that information for us so that we can then have the pupil personnel worker and counselors provide additional services and support for the student."

Another contributing factor to students graduating and not dropping out identified by the principal was the relationships student intervention specialists build with students.

The student intervention specialist is not a teacher giving them grades, they are not an assistant principal giving them a consequence, and I think students know they have the ear of the student intervention specialist that truly wants to help them.

Response to Interview Question Three

From your perspective, how would you change the role and responsibilities of the student intervention specialist to further reduce the number of students dropping out of

school?

Principal D responded that the student intervention specialist position should be yearlong. “I would make the position 12-month because the summer is actually a critical time when students can earn credits, do credit recovery.” The principal went on and shared, “I would love to have a student intervention specialist available to meet every new student who is enrolled during the summer months.”

The principal described another change to the working hours of the student intervention specialist. “I would recommend that they be eight hour employees.” The principal shared that the student intervention specialist should be available before the buses arrive in the morning and in the late afternoon to meet with students and staff after school.

Principal D believes that additional student intervention specialists should be hired for some schools with more challenging student populations. Principal D believes that caseloads for student intervention specialists need to be manageable if the position is going to be effective with the intended outcome of reducing dropouts and increasing graduation rates.

I would have one student intervention specialist focus specifically on ninth grade, because I think it is such a critical year for student success throughout high school. I think having this resource would set the right tone with the incoming ninth graders. I would add to their responsibilities as the ninth grade student intervention specialist duties related to ninth grade transition programs like Link Crew.

The principal described using another student intervention specialist assigned to the school to concentrate on the needs of upperclassmen, including graduation support.

Principal D recently hired a student intervention specialist. The principal described the strongest candidates as being those who had some college experience, especially in the area of counseling or social work. The principal recommended that consideration be given to adding additional educational requirements to the job posting. “Those candidates that had some sort of background like that really had the big picture view of strategies for working with at-risk students and were more knowledgeable about resources available in the community.” The principal also described the ability of a student intervention specialist with some college or a degree to be a role model for high school students and more knowledgeable about the college experience when talking with students.

The principal mentioned that there is nothing contractual about the student intervention specialist having their own office, but believes it would be a good idea. Last year the student intervention specialist at the school was in an open office area. “I see the need for a private office for conversations with students and a designated area so students, staff, and parents know where to go to find the student intervention specialist.” The principal stated a direct phone line to avoid any confusion for parents would be helpful as well.

Response to Interview Question Four

From your perspective, what professional development opportunities would further enhance the role of the student intervention specialist, thus resulting in a decline in the number of students dropping out of school?

Principal D stated that student intervention specialists need additional training on data analysis. “I think they need to have an understanding of how to use our data sources and be able to manipulate the data using an Excel spreadsheet and other software.” The principal added that having the student intervention specialists share how each of them tracks interventions and strategies used to support each student would be worthwhile professional development.

The principal shared that student intervention specialists need training on graduation requirements. “I think they need continuous professional development on keeping abreast of changes in graduation requirements and the timeline for the changes in dropout age restrictions.” Principal D added that student intervention specialists need to fully understand the new cohort graduation model calculation.

The principal stated that professional development in the area of knowing and accessing available community supports for students is necessary.

I think it is very beneficial for our student intervention specialist to have a relationship with organizations like the Department of Social Services and know what is available for children. They need to annually contact the organizations, or meet with them, to know who is running various programs. I think we all fall into the trap of working at our schools and sometimes we only know what is happening in our building and not what is available in the surrounding community.

Principal D suggested that student intervention specialists receive ongoing training in strategies to meet student needs.

I think we always want to be providing professional development that adds tools to their tool kit. I think they need to be continuously collaborating with the other student intervention specialists in the county and expanding their knowledge about what strategies are working to motivate and interest students in coming to school and graduating. So I think that it is really important for our student intervention specialist, just like how a math teacher gets professional development on what has been proven to really work, receive training on what really works for dropout prevention.

The principal shared that adding tools to the toolkit included national strategies. The principal recommended that student intervention specialists be provided journals and other publications with dropout prevention strategies and success stories.

The principal identified the role of a student intervention specialist as emotionally stressful from time to time.

I think that we need to make sure that our student intervention specialists know that we have the Employee Assistance Program available to them. Having a student that a student intervention specialist has been working with drop out can make them feel unsuccessful. We need professional development on how to deal with that, so they don't become burned out after three years. I don't know if you call that professional development or not, but that is what I'm calling it.

Response to Interview Question Five

From your perspective, in a school system with limited resources, do you consider the student intervention specialist position a wise investment for the purpose of limiting the number of dropouts and increasing the graduation rate? Why or why not?

Principal D responded in the affirmative to this question.

Yes, absolutely. I think you are getting your bang for your buck. Truly when you look at the salary plus benefits of the student intervention specialist position, in a school with 200 some graduates each year, and then look at our graduation rates and dropout numbers, I think you can see the benefits of the position.

The principal continued by stating that “the student intervention specialist has been essential to maintaining the dropout rate and I think a lot of their work is very specific to really keeping as many students who are in very difficult situations in school to graduate.” The principal shared that “as the economy has turned down and the home lives get more challenging for our students, I think the role of the student intervention specialist is really benefiting our school.”

Summary

The interviews and paraphrased responses were for the purpose of gathering necessary information to answer the primary question of the study. The primary question of the study was: Based on principals’ perceptions, what is the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates?

The commonalities and differences in principals’ perceptions and expectations of the student intervention specialist position are identified in Chapter V. As a result of these data findings in Chapter IV, the researcher identified critical responsibilities of the position as perceived by the principals and recommended potential changes to the position’s roles and responsibilities to further reduce the number of dropouts and increase the graduation rate in the system.

CHAPTER V

Emerging Themes and Recommendations

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to determine both commonalities and differences in high school principals' perceptions and expectations of the student intervention specialist position in the school system studied. The primary question of the study was: Based on principals' perceptions, what is the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates?

Chapter IV presents detailed paraphrased results and findings from transcriptions of four, face-to face interviews. The interviews were conducted with purposefully selected high school principals. Each principal was asked the same five questions regarding the role of the student intervention specialist position. The principals reviewed the paraphrased information and provided amendments and additions to the information to best reflect their intended response to each question. Principals confirmed the paraphrased responses and quotes used in Chapter IV. To ensure confidentiality the researcher randomly assigned an identifying letter to each principal.

Chapter V identifies emerging themes and patterns from the paraphrased information. The in-depth interviews enabled the researcher to obtain rich, focused data regarding the principals' perceptions of the role of the student intervention specialist. This chapter is divided into those emerging themes and patterns and includes recommendations for consideration by the system to enhance the student intervention specialist position that could lead to reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates.

Emerging Themes

Advocates and Relationship Builders

All four study participants believe that a vital role of the student intervention specialist is to serve as an advocate for students. Study participants strongly suggested that student intervention specialists must be able to connect with and build relationships with students. Principal A highlighted that student intervention specialists need to “advocate” for students at risk of dropping out of school. Additionally, Principal A identified making “connections” with students and families and the ability to “serve as a role model” as critical components to being a student advocate and breaking the “vicious cycle in which” some students are trapped.

Principal B noted the need for the student intervention specialists to build relationships not only with students, but families as well. The principal believes that home visits and the demonstration of the school’s willingness to reach out to families as important. The principal stated that meeting “the parents at a halfway point” went a long way toward solving various challenges with students. Principal B also described student intervention specialists as the last line of defense when a student is talking about dropping out.

Principal C reinforced the notion of advocacy by stating, “I think they serve as a student advocate and it is important they develop relationships with students and families.” An essential function of advocating is “establishing a strong dialogue with the students and their parents.” Principal C also stated, “Students need someone that they can trust in the building and that has the time to devote some energy towards them and their needs.”

Similarly to Principals A, B, and C, Principal D identified the need for strong relationships with families of at-risk students as being an important role of the student intervention specialist. Principal D described the need for student intervention specialists to meet with parents at school and visit with them at home. Principal D indicated that the student intervention specialists are keenly in tune with the lives of the students on their caseloads. The principal shared that student intervention specialists are intimately familiar with issues occurring in students' lives both inside and outside of school, such as homelessness.

The student intervention specialist is not a teacher giving them grades, they are not an assistant principal giving them a consequence, and I think students know they have the ear of the student intervention specialist that truly wants to help them.

Staff Liaisons

Study participants identified the need for student intervention specialists to serve as a liaison between students and staff, particularly teachers, as a key function of student intervention specialists. All four study participants acknowledged that student intervention specialists serve as key connectors between students and their teachers.

Principal A noted that student intervention specialists frequently “needed to be a mediator between students and teachers.” The principal also noted that it was often challenging for a student to know how to approach a teacher about certain issues.

Principal B suggested that many times teachers do not realize situations that exist in a student's home life that may be impacting the student's education. The principal

believes that student intervention specialists can share this kind of information with teachers and help students “be successful in the classroom.”

Principal C called the student intervention specialist a “vital link between students and teachers.” The principal noted that often a student might be “resistant to talk to a teacher to get help” and thinks the student intervention specialist could assume the role as a “connector in that regard.”

Principal D described the student intervention specialist advocate role as a liaison between students and staff. “They build those relationships with students and with parents, and they are vital in sharing information with counselors, administrators, and teachers to help students.” Principal D stated that student intervention specialists need to “work directly with students and staff at a school to help all students have a positive learning experience, so that they are here and meet graduation requirements.” The principal stated, “I think that the student intervention specialist has to really be able to collaborate well with counselors, assistant principals and teachers.”

Principal A and B identified that student intervention specialists need to be somewhat cautious in this staff liaison role. Principal A stated, “Sometimes the student intervention specialists are not seen as equal with teachers, and their voices are not always heard as they advocate for the needs of students.” Principal B noted that “they walk a thin line with teachers” that feel they have already exhausted every possible support for the student.

Community Connectors

Study participants identified that connecting students with the resources and community agencies and other stakeholders as key functions of student intervention

specialists. Study participants noted that student intervention specialists regularly seek and secure resources for students. Principal A shared that student intervention specialists frequently connect students with medical and mental health services. The principal stated:

They have to help bring the community to them rather than them to the community, because most of these kids and families cannot navigate out there.

They have no clue how to set up a mental health appointment or even who to talk to.

Principal A additionally noted that student intervention specialists can help with securing proper clothing, food, and shelter.

Principal B's perspective aligns with Principal A's regarding the importance of the student intervention specialist serving as a contact with community partners.

Principal B described the student intervention specialist as a "community liaison" who needs to be accessible to families within the community. Additionally, Principal B noted that student intervention specialists provide a "critical link and work directly with the Department of Juvenile Justice and the Department of Social Services." Principal B further described the partnership with the families and various agencies as a "combined force" to support students.

Principal C also cited the ability of student intervention specialists to connect students with community resources as a contributing factor in reducing the dropout rate. "They are vital in bringing in that community aspect, getting in touch with the parents, talking with community agencies, even arranging transportation to get to and from school."

Team Members

Principals A, B, and C noted the critical importance of the student intervention specialists serving on school-wide support teams such as student support teams.

Principal A noted that student intervention specialists “bring the whole picture to the table, including what is happening in the family.” Principal B stated, “They are a part of that team, so that means they are not there just to take notes – they are actually there to provide suggestions to support the students.” Principal C recognized the value of student intervention specialists participating on the various school-wide teams. According to Principal C, through these teams, the student intervention specialist is able to “brainstorm with other staff members about creative solutions” for challenges students encounter in the schooling process.

Academic Supporters

Principal A noted that it is essential for the student intervention specialist to “support their academic needs to help them be successful.” Further Principal A noted that student intervention specialists need to “be someone that takes a different look at how a kid is going to graduate.”

Principal B felt that the most successful student intervention specialists were those that say “there is another plan – there is something we can do, let’s not give up.” The principal highlighted that many students have graduated as a result of a student intervention specialist being “willing to go back into the lion’s den to fight for a student to have one more chance when teachers had become frustrated and were done with the student.”

Principal C stated that student intervention specialists need “to monitor student progress on a regular basis, not only academically, but their attendance, their behavior, the number of credits they are earning, and their student service learning hours.” The principal further acknowledged the ability to “actively monitor student progress in real time” as a key to academic success.

Principal D reinforced the need for student intervention specialists to support at-risk students’ academics and other needs by stating, “The role includes a lot of being creative, individualizing what you are doing based on what each student needs.” Principal D emphasized that student intervention specialists need to be among the first to notice a student’s grades or attendance are “slipping.” The principal indicated that student intervention specialists should follow up with teachers to ensure that students are working in class and completing all assignments.

Attendance Monitors

While not a particular point of emphasis among study participants, two of the interviewees asserted that a function of the student intervention specialist was to monitor student attendance. Principal A identified accountability for student attendance as a primary role of the student intervention specialist. “Knowing who is in school and who needs to be in school is extremely important.” Principal D identified the same role indicating that student intervention specialists need to monitor “attendance on a daily basis.”

Crisis Managers

All principals identified strong relationship building skills with students as a primary role of student intervention specialists. However, Principal A took that one step

further when the principal noted that because of the student intervention specialist's relationship with a student "the specialist might be the best individual to respond when a student is melting down." Additionally, Principal A stated, "The student intervention specialist needs to solve a problem before it becomes a problem."

Transition Facilitators

Principal A described a key role of the student intervention specialist as coordinating the transition of students at risk of dropping out of school into a school and transferring among schools. Principal B added to the importance of this coordinating role by classifying the student intervention specialist as the one who "builds a transition plan for students" moving from school to school.

Principal C agreed with both Principal A and B by stating, "They need to become more familiar with the students at the middle school levels so there is nothing new they need to learn when the students transition into ninth grade." Additionally, Principal C expressed the importance of student specialists supporting students as they transition from grade to grade.

Cohort Graduation Monitors

Several principals maintained that the adoption of the new cohort graduation model and the change to the mandatory age requirement for dropouts in Maryland would further promote the need for student intervention specialists. Principal A believes that student intervention specialists need to "work to get kids back in school that have dropped out." Principal A added that the new dropout age limit will change the role of the student intervention specialists.

Keeping students in school beyond 16 and 17 years of age will require more pressure to make connections to students outside of school and keep them coming. Student intervention specialists and other staff will need to make a shift in focus from intervention to graduation planning.

Principal C reported that student intervention specialists need “to work on reclaiming dropouts constantly.” Principal D concluded that student intervention specialists need to “recognize” students at risk of dropping out early, including those students who do not “necessarily hit all of those low marks” which are easily identifiable. Principal D suggested that a full understanding of the new cohort graduation model calculation would be a necessity for all student intervention specialists.

Graduation Coaches

Study participants spoke to the student intervention specialist’s role in ensuring students at risk of dropping out graduate from school. Principal A highlighted the need for student intervention specialists to “help students navigate pathways not only to graduation, but to the world beyond high school.”

Principal C stated, “I think it is really their job to make sure that all resources have been exhausted in order to prevent a drop in the first place.” The principal further noted that if a student is not progressing towards graduation “there should be flags or alerts that pop up.” Principal C described the success of the student intervention specialist in helping students graduate as a response to those “flags.” The principal continued by noting that student intervention specialists are constantly “coming up with creative opportunities in keeping students on track with graduating.”

Principal D identified three specific functions to support graduation which include redesigning schedules for students with attendance issues, monitoring grades with the aim of early detection and intervention, and monitoring graduation requirements.

Resources

Study participants revealed that additional resources are necessary to support the efforts of the student intervention specialists. These resources range from transportation options to and from school to access to technology.

Principal A promoted the need for student intervention specialists to have access to technology. The principal believes the student intervention specialist could then lend students technology resources, thus providing students with a means to access computers in their homes. To enhance student accessibility, the student intervention specialists would have an avenue for providing students free Internet connectivity which would then allow students the access necessary for remedial supports and potential credit recovery courses.

Principal C suggested that student intervention specialists be provided with a system-owned vehicle to enable them to transport students and conduct home visits. Principal A recognized student transportation needs associated with the functions of student intervention specialists, but addressed the need by providing them with a budget to secure taxi cab transportation for students. According to Principal A, an enhanced budget would allow the student intervention specialists to support students with commuter vouchers, medical vouchers, and food resources.

Principal D stressed the fact that student intervention specialists already “help students with everything from clothing to school supplies” and that additional resources

in this area would be helpful. Principal D also acknowledged that a private office and direct phone line would be beneficial resources to assist the student intervention specialists in supporting students and their need for privacy. Principal D believes that additional publications and journals that relate to dropout prevention strategies could be a useful resource to further inform the practices of student intervention specialists.

Employment

All four study participants expressed a need to increase the student intervention specialist employment year and availability. Principals B, C, and D recommended that the position be increased from a 10-month position to a 12-month position. Principal B stated, “We can’t afford to not have them here for two months if we are going to be successful with more students.” Principal C agreed with Principal B by insisting that student intervention specialists are needed “during the most vulnerable time of the school year, mid-June to the beginning of August, when students are highly mobile, not connected with school, and probably when they need the most support.”

Principal D supported the concept of a 12-month employment position by stating, “The summer is actually a critical time when students can earn credits.” The principal added, “I would love to have a student intervention specialist available to meet every new student who is enrolled during the summer months.” Principal D also supported expanding the work day from seven-and-a-half hours to eight hours so the student intervention specialists would be available to work with students before and after school.

While Principal A did not specifically mention expanding the position to 12 months, the principal did recommend that student intervention specialists work summer

hours to support students who are attending summer school or transitioning to a new school.

Caseloads

In schools with smaller student populations, student intervention specialists are split between two school sites. Principal B, who shares a student intervention specialist with another school, felt the position should be fulltime and dedicated to one school regardless of a school's total enrollment.

The value of the student intervention specialist was further confirmed by Principal C in the recommendation for large schools that every grade level be staffed with a student intervention specialist. The principal shared concerns regarding the current caseloads and expectations for student intervention specialists.

Principal D believes that additional positions are needed at schools with challenging student populations. The principal shared that caseloads for student intervention specialists must be manageable in order for the position to be effective in reducing the number of dropouts and increasing graduation rates.

Principal D was the only principal to mention supporting student intervention specialists emotionally. The principal pointed out, "Having a student that a student intervention specialist has been working with drop out can make them feel unsuccessful. The principal shared that support was needed for student intervention specialists on how "to deal with that, so they don't become burned out after three years."

Professional Development

All four study participants indicated that student intervention specialists would benefit from additional professional development. However, a consistent pattern of

specific professional development needs did not emerge from study responses other than the topic of additional training in best practices to reduce dropouts.

Principal A suggested that student intervention specialists need professional development to address student mental health issues. Additionally, Principal A described the need for “more tools in the toolbox” including professional development on best dropout practices for working with students at risk of dropping out of high school. Principal A believes that student intervention specialists need to collaborate and network more on successful strategies that help students graduate.

Principal B recommended that student intervention specialists receive additional training in legal matters such as custody-related issues. The principal stated, “It’s pretty important to know what you can say to parents and stepparents without getting the school system in trouble.” In addition, Principal B indicated a need for student intervention specialists to receive training to assist students transitioning from different placements, such as incarceration to school and middle school to high school.

Principal C promoted the need for professional development that would enable student intervention specialists to identify students who may be at risk of dropping out of school more accurately and earlier. Principal C explained, “They have to be familiar with what are some common or contributing factors that might lead to a student dropping out so they can be more accurate with trying to identify at-risk students, even before they reach high school.” Principal C’s thoughts aligned with Principal A as the principal described the need for more tools in the toolbox by identifying the need for professional development in the area of supporting “reluctant learners.”

Like Principal A, B, and C, Principal D identified the need for professional development in the areas that have “proven to really work.” Principal D endorsed professional development for the student intervention specialists in the area of data analysis. Principal D noted, “I think they need to have an understanding of how to use our data sources and be able to manipulate the data using an Excel spreadsheet and other software.” Principal D also felt student intervention specialists would benefit from further training in graduation requirements for students.

Both Principals C and D referenced the need for student intervention specialists to know community resources that are available to support students and their families. Principal C stated that student intervention specialists would “benefit from more accurate information on community resources to address student challenges.” Principal D stated:

I think it is beneficial for our student intervention specialist to have a relationship with organizations like the Department of Social Services and know what is available for children. They need to annually contact the organizations or meet with them, to know who is running various programs. I think we all fall into the trap of working at our schools and sometimes we only know what is happening in our building and not what is available in the surrounding community.

Principal B agreed with Principal A that student intervention specialists from across the district need to collaborate more regularly for professional development on best practices. Principal B identified that sometimes student intervention specialists are “lumped into what we do here on staff development days, and often it is not what they need.” Principal B also noted that using pupil personnel workers as professional development trainers may be appropriate. Principal D reinforced the need for student

intervention specialists to learn and share together success strategies in working with this challenging population. “I think they need to be continuously collaborating with the other student intervention specialists in the county and expanding their knowledge about what strategies are working to motivate and interest students in coming to school and graduating.”

Qualifications

Principal B reported that many times student intervention specialists are asked to assume the role of a counselor. The principal suggested that consideration be given to adding a counseling degree to the position requirements, and also noted that this would likely create an unfunded expense in the budget.

Principal D recently interviewed student intervention specialist candidates and indicated the strongest candidates were those with some college experience, especially in the area of counseling or social work. “Those candidates that had some sort of background like that really had the big picture view of strategies for working with at-risk students and were more knowledgeable about resources available in the community.”

Worthwhile Investment

All four study participants acknowledged the merits of the student intervention specialist position. Principal A stated, “I do see it as a wise investment.” The principal attributed the success of many graduates to the “wise investment” in the student intervention specialist positions.

Principal B shared the same type of comment by stating, “I think it is a great investment.” The principal added, “It’s another person that can sit at the table when you

are talking about student support, who can take on cases, and have time to invest with some of the most critical needs of students.”

Principal C shared, “Absolutely, I think it is a wise investment.” The principal further supported the position by stating, “I think that not only is it a wise investment, but I think that most schools could benefit from having additional people in these positions.”

Principal D responded:

Yes, absolutely. I think you are getting your bang for your buck. Truly when you look at the salary plus benefits of the student intervention specialist position, in a school with 200 some graduates each year, and then look at our graduation rates and dropout numbers, I think you can see the benefits of the position.

Correlation of Themes, Job Description, and Researched-Based Strategies

The analyzed information from the principal interview process provided emerging patterns to answer the primary question of this study: Based on principals’ perceptions, what is the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates? Table 5.1 outlines the alignments among the researched-based highly effective dropout prevention strategies discovered during the literature review, the current student intervention specialist job description, and the emerged patterns of principals’ perceptions regarding the role of the student intervention specialist position.

Table 5.1

Notable Correlations Among Effective Dropout Prevention Strategies, Current Job Responsibilities of Student Intervention Specialists, and Emerging Themes From Principal Perceptions of the Role of the Student Intervention Specialist

Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Role Responsibilities From Student Intervention Specialist Job Description	Emerging Themes From Principal Perceptions of the Role of the Student Intervention Specialist
School-Community Collaboration	Develop effective relationships with community service providers, youth agencies and local committees in order to facilitate access of supplemental resources for students and families.	Community Connectors
Safe Learning Environments	Meet regularly with targeted students to build relationships and understand individual needs.	Advocates and Relationship Builders
	Assist students in reducing absenteeism, improving grades and reducing discipline referrals.	Academic Supporters Attendance Monitors
	Participate in effective behavioral and conflict management/resolution efforts.	Staff Liaisons Crisis Managers
	Maintain confidentiality of student information.	No noted correlation.
Family Engagement	Meet regularly with targeted students to build relationships and understand individual needs.	Advocates and Relationship Builders
	Develop effective working relationships with families through correspondence, school and phone conferencing and home visits.	Advocates and Relationship Builders
	Participate in transitional processes,	Transition Facilitators

Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Role Responsibilities From Student Intervention Specialist Job Description	Emerging Themes From Principal Perceptions of the Role of the Student Intervention Specialist
	including intakes and transfers.	
	Serve as active participant in school Student Support Team meetings to help develop and implement appropriate strategies and interventions.	Staff Liaisons Team Members Academic Supporters
Mentoring/ Tutoring	Meet regularly with targeted students to build relationships and understand individual needs.	Advocates and Relationship Builders
	Provide case management and intervention for identified students.	Academic Supporters
	Assist students in reducing absenteeism, improving grades and reducing discipline referrals.	Academic Supporters Attendance Monitors
	Collaborate with school-based personnel in order to advocate for students and provide meaningful interventions.	Staff Liaisons Academic Supporters
	Help to facilitate efforts to ensure smooth transition for students from middle school to high school.	Transition Facilitators
	Arrange for individual academic support as needed.	Academic Supporters
Alternative Schooling	Collaborate with school-based personnel in order to advocate for students and provide meaningful interventions.	Staff Liaisons Academic Supporters
	Help to facilitate efforts to ensure	Transition Facilitators

Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Role Responsibilities From Student Intervention Specialist Job Description	Emerging Themes From Principal Perceptions of the Role of the Student Intervention Specialist
	smooth transition for students from middle school to high school.	
	Participate in transitional processes, including intakes and transfers.	Transition Facilitators
	Arrange for individual academic support as needed.	Academic Supporters
	Monitor all student withdrawals for the purpose of reclaiming dropouts.	Attendance Monitors Cohort Graduation Monitors
	Participate in effective behavioral and conflict management/resolution efforts.	Staff Liaisons
	Serve as active participant in school Student Support Team meetings to help develop and implement appropriate strategies and interventions.	Team Members Academic Supporters
After-School Opportunities	Implement school-based dropout prevention efforts.	No noted correlation.
	Provide case management and intervention for identified students.	Academic Supporters
	Collaborate with school-based personnel in order to advocate for students and provide meaningful interventions.	Staff Liaisons Academic Supporters
	Arrange for individual academic support as needed.	Academic Supporters
	Monitor credits earned, SSL hour completion, completer requirements and any credit recovery needs for	Academic Supporters Graduation Coaches

Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Role Responsibilities From Student Intervention Specialist Job Description	Emerging Themes From Principal Perceptions of the Role of the Student Intervention Specialist
	graduation.	
	Assist in the coordination and supervision of special activities.	No noted correlation.
Individualized Instruction	Meet regularly with targeted students to build relationships and understand individual needs.	Advocates and Relationship Builders
	Provide case management and intervention for identified students.	Academic Supporters
	Assist students in reducing absenteeism, improving grades and reducing discipline referrals.	Academic Supporters Attendance Monitors
	Collaborate with school-based personnel in order to advocate for students and provide meaningful intervention.	Staff Liaisons Academic Supporters
	Arrange for individual academic support as needed.	Academic Supporters
Professional Development	No noted correlation.	Professional Development
Educational Technology	No noted correlation.	Resources
Career and Technology Education	No noted correlation.	Graduation Coaches

Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Role Responsibilities From Student Intervention Specialist Job Description	Emerging Themes From Principal Perceptions of the Role of the Student Intervention Specialist
Systemic Renewal	No noted correlation.	No noted correlation.
Early Childhood Education	No noted correlation.	No noted correlation.
Early Literacy Development	No noted correlation.	No noted correlation.
Service-Learning	No noted correlation.	No noted correlation.
Active Learning	No noted correlation.	No noted correlation.
No noted correlation.	Maintain all student and personnel documentation as required and submit in a timely fashion.	No noted correlation.
No noted correlation.	Demonstrate courteous and professional demeanor to all stakeholders.	No noted correlation.
No noted correlation.	No noted correlation.	Employment
No noted correlation.	No noted correlation.	Caseloads
No noted correlation.	No noted correlation.	Qualifications

Effective Strategies From the National Dropout Prevention Center/Network	Role Responsibilities From Student Intervention Specialist Job Description	Emerging Themes From Principal Perceptions of the Role of the Student Intervention Specialist
No noted correlation.	No noted correlation.	Worthwhile Investment

Note. Effective strategies quoted from National Dropout Prevention Center/Network (2012a).

Responsibilities associated with student intervention specialist job description quoted from Appendix A.

Emerging themes from principal perceptions of the role of the student intervention specialist are explained under corresponding subsections of this chapter.

Figure 5.1 illustrates the alignment of the researched-based highly effective dropout prevention strategies discovered during the literature review, the current student intervention specialist job description, and principal perceptions regarding the role of the student intervention specialist. The diagram also illustrates areas that were not identified as being aligned.

- The overlapping area of the three circles (A) depicts the agreement of the research-based highly effective dropout prevention strategies, the current student intervention specialist job description, and principal perceptions of the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing graduation rates. The alignment of these three subjects is outlined in detailed in Table 5.1.
- The area where only the research-based highly effective dropout prevention strategies and the principal perceptions overlap (B) represents areas that should be included as part of the role of a student intervention specialist according to the analysis of principal perceptions. These areas include professional development,

technology resources, and additional graduation coaching related to career and technology education.

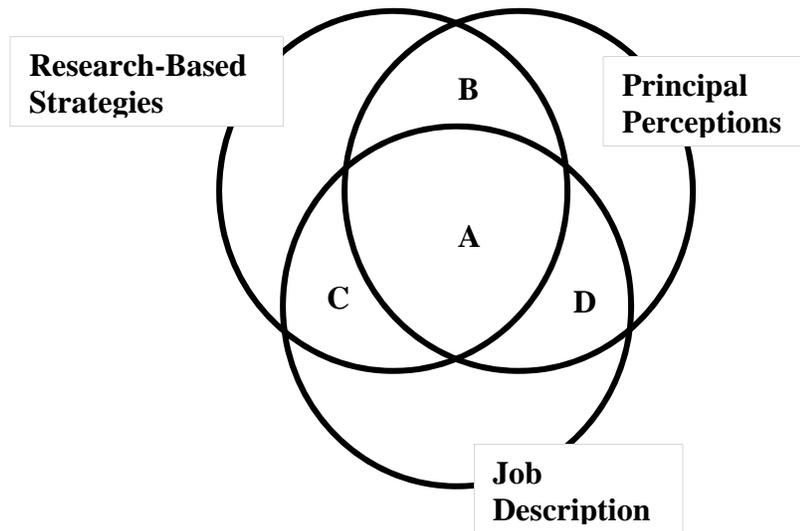


Figure 5.1. Relationship of Highly Effective Dropout Prevention Strategies, Current Student Intervention Specialist Job Description, and Principal Perceptions After the Research Study

- The area where only the research-based highly effective dropout prevention strategies and the student intervention specialist job description overlap (C) identifies research-based highly effective dropout prevention strategies that principals perceived as not applicable for inclusion as part of the role of a student intervention specialist or that were not identified during the interview process. These areas include references to supervision of special activities, implementation of school-based dropout prevention efforts, and maintaining confidentiality.

- The area where only the principal perceptions and the job description overlap (D) represents areas that principals perceived to be appropriate as part of the role of the student intervention specialist, but are not identified as research-based highly effective dropout prevention strategies. This study did not identify any specific items in this area.

Considerations

From the emerged patterns of principals' perceptions the researcher offers the following recommendations to enhance the student intervention specialist position that could lead to further reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates.

Recommendation One

The department of human resources should revisit the student intervention specialist job description based on the findings of this study and consider refining the roles and responsibilities.

Rationale: The researcher believes in order to maximize the effectiveness of this position in reducing dropouts and increasing graduation rates, the job description needs to be updated. It is essential for the job description to accurately capture the roles and responsibilities of the position in order to hire the most qualified applicants. In addition, applicants need to fully understand the scope of responsibilities that accompany the position.

Recommendation Two

The department of human resources should consider changing the title of student intervention specialist.

Rationale: Student intervention specialist or the official title, High School Dropout Prevention/Intervention Services Specialist denotes a somewhat negative connotation. According to the interviews, the principals described a position that promotes graduation of students as opposed to a position that focuses solely on preventing dropouts. A title such as graduation coach may be more positively received by students and parents. Additionally it portrays an investment in the student's future beyond graduation.

Recommendation Three

The district should consider increasing the availability of resources for the student intervention specialists.

Rationale: Study participants indicated that the effectiveness of the position would increase if student intervention specialists had access to resources such as: technology to lend to students; vouchers for medical treatment and materials to support students; and a vehicle for visiting students' homes and transporting them to school. Based on the interviews, the researcher believes that the student intervention specialists' time would be better spent on helping children as opposed to searching for resources. The adoption of this recommendation would have budgetary impact.

Recommendation Four

The department of student services should annually provide contact information and a comprehensive list of community resources available by school community.

Rationale: Student intervention specialists invest a substantial amount of time researching community resources and ever-changing contact information for services necessary to meet the needs of students. A list would not only save time for the student

intervention specialist, but would ensure that all known resources are identified and readily available. An updated, comprehensive list should include the nature of the resource, location, and contact information. A list of this nature would not only support current student intervention specialists, but would provide an instant list of resources for newly employed student intervention specialists.

Recommendation Five

The district should explore the possibility of expanding the student intervention specialist position from a 10-month to a 12-month employee.

Rationale: Based on interview responses, students and schools would benefit from working with student intervention specialists during the summer months when students are not in school. Students transitioning into the school during the summer months would benefit from a support system that would be administered by the student intervention specialist. The researcher believes the implementation of this recommendation could result in increasing student graduation rates. Students at risk of dropping out of school cannot afford to experience a disconnection from the school environment, making the decision to return to school in the fall more challenging. The adoption of this recommendation would have budgetary impact.

Recommendation Six

The district should develop a differentiated professional development plan for student intervention specialists.

Rationale: Study responses reveal the need to offer student intervention specialists further professional development in a range of areas specific to the position. Often student intervention specialists are included in professional development activities

that are focused on the interests of classroom teachers. A structured, differentiated plan would promote on-going training necessary for the student intervention specialists to advance their skillset. Particular attention should be given to the areas of the new cohort graduation model, reclaiming dropouts, best practices in dropout prevention, and the impact of Maryland's new law transitioning to compulsory attendance age from 16 to age 18.

Recommendation Seven

Caseload thresholds should be established in order to ensure student intervention specialists are not assigned an unmanageable number of students to support.

Rationale: The demands of the position require intensive support for individual students. If assigned too many students, the overall effectiveness of the student intervention specialist may be compromised. Principals consistently identified the need for more student intervention specialists, and this recommendation should be seriously evaluated. The adoption of this recommendation would have budgetary impact.

Recommendation Eight

The researcher should inform the high school principals regarding the findings of this study.

Rationale: Principals direct the day-to-day activities and duties of staff members. The emerging themes and recommendations of this study identify some of the best practices to reduce dropouts and increase graduation rates credited to the student intervention specialists' efforts. Using the position as ideally defined by principal perceptions could change the lives of some high school students and potential dropouts.

Recommendation Nine

Considering the findings of this research study, high school principals should refine their hiring practices.

Rationale: Fully understanding the ideal roles and responsibilities of the student intervention specialist position could aid principals in the selection of the individual best fitted for the position. Principals should carefully consider the educational qualifications of each applicant and their experience in working with students at risk of dropping out of school. In the opinion of this researcher the job demands a creative individual that is willing to take risks, is motivated by student success, and willing to adapt to the diverse backgrounds of students to support their graduation.

Recommendation Ten

The researcher should inform senior staff members regarding the findings of this study.

Rationale: Senior staff members are responsible for allocating finite resources and directing goals and outcomes for the school system. Many of the study's findings and recommendations offer viable avenues to enhance the student intervention specialist position which may positively impact the district's graduation rate. Decreasing the number of dropouts and increasing graduation rates will have a positive effect on the school system's school performance index. Staff will need to carefully weigh the value of the recommendations with the related-budgetary impact that accompanies each recommendation.

Limitations

Given the uniqueness of the student intervention specialists to the school system studied, the study findings and recommendations may not be transferable to other school districts unless a district is exploring the possibility of adopting a similar position and strategy or currently employs a similar position. Additionally, given that only high school principals were interviewed in this study, it would be difficult to generalize the findings to similar elementary or middle school positions.

The researcher purposefully selected high school principals to interview because they ultimately hold the responsibility for student achievement for their schools, including student graduation and dropout rates. The research focused on the ideal role of a student intervention specialist as perceived by the high school principals. The small sample size, number of principals interviewed, limits the researcher's ability to determine a range of themes and connections that may have emerged from a larger study group.

The researcher's senior level position in the school system studied may have influenced study participants' responses. For this reason, interview responses may have been motivated by external factors such as promoting one's self, gaining favor, or seeking additional resources.

Once the formal interview with each principal began, the researcher intentionally asked the questions in order and only elaborated as necessary to clarify the questions. The researcher purposefully endeavored to maintain a neutral facial expression and body language. However, participants may have perceived unintentional agreement or disagreement that influenced their interview responses or ensuing revisions.

Considerations for Future Research

Further research could refine the ideal student intervention specialist model. A study could focus on data collected from the student intervention specialists. Other studies could explore the attitudes and perceptions of students, parents, school staffs, or community members who work with the student intervention specialists.

Since principal leadership styles vary, future research could illuminate the role of the principal in utilizing the student intervention specialist. The ultimate measure of success would be the reduction of student dropouts and increased graduation rates.

The literature review identified that the process of dropping out of school often starts much earlier than high school age. Researchers may consider focusing on whether a position similar to the high school student intervention specialist would have merit at the elementary or middle school levels in reducing dropouts and increasing the graduation rates.

Conclusions

This study sought to determine both commonalities and differences in high school principals' perceptions and expectations of the student intervention specialist position in the school system studied. The primary question of the study was: Based on principals' perceptions, what is the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates? After reviewing all the data, it is evident that principals have very specific perceptions regarding the role of the student intervention specialist position.

Students who fail to minimally obtain a high school diploma will struggle to remain competitive in the 21st century. The educational requirements for jobs and

employment opportunities have changed dramatically in recent years and will continue to evolve and require a more educated workforce. School systems need to address the critical needs of students at risk of dropping out and not graduating.

The results revealed from this study reinforce the need for school staffs to build strong relationships with students and their families, connect students with school and community resources, advocate for the best interests of students, and closely monitor students at risk of dropping out of school. Additionally, considerations were offered for refinements to the student intervention specialist job description and position including training, qualifications, caseloads, and length of employment year.

Principals are strong proponents of the student intervention specialist position. It is apparent from the responses offered during the interviews that principals recognize the inherent benefits of the student intervention specialist position and the direct influence these positions have on increasing the percentage of students who graduate high school.

This study has revealed to the researcher, a senior staff member for the system studied, that the student intervention specialist position as described by the principals is a cost-effective measure to reduce dropouts and increase graduation rates. The system cannot afford additional counselors and social workers that could fulfill a similar role. As a non-certificated position, student intervention specialists cost significantly less than certificated staff members and are effective in their defined roles.

Systems across the country that struggle with the availability of financial resources and determining interventions to meet the needs of students at risk of dropping out of high school should consider a position similar to the student intervention specialist.

The researcher believes that this position could benefit students in other school districts and increase their opportunities to graduate.

The principals interviewed for this study agreed on many of the ideal roles and responsibilities of the student intervention specialist position. Their emphases varied on ways to ideally improve the effectiveness of the position. Principals described a diligent, creative individual who always has one more plan to support students at risk of not graduating. Principals are encouraged to remember their image of the ideal student intervention specialist the next time they have the opportunity to hire an individual for one of these positions.

Appendix A

Student Intervention Specialist Job Description

Title: Paraprofessional - High School Dropout Prevention/Intervention Services
Specialist

Minimum Requirements:

- High school diploma/GED.
- Must meet Highly Qualified status (A.A. Degree, 48 credit hours, or have successfully passed the Paraprofessional Praxis Test).
- Experience working with at-risk youth.
- Meets all State and Federal guidelines in accordance with No Child Left Behind.

Essential Skill and Attitudes:

- A.A. in Human Services preferred.
- Effective interpersonal skills.
- Training and experience working with populations relevant to the assigned school.
- Ability to perform the essential functions of the job with or without reasonable accommodations.

Reports to: School Principal and Supervisor of Alternative Programs and Student
Services

Responsibilities:

- Implement school-based dropout prevention efforts.
- Meet regularly with targeted students to build relationships and understand individual needs.

- Provide case management and intervention for identified students.
- Assist students in reducing absenteeism, improving grades and reducing discipline referrals.
- Develop effective working relationships with families through correspondence, school and phone conferencing and home visits.
- Collaborate with school-based personnel (guidance counselors, teachers, administrators, etc.) in order to advocate for students and provide meaningful intervention.
- Help to facilitate efforts to ensure smooth transition for students from middle school to high school.
- Develop effective relationships with community service providers, youth agencies and local committees in order to facilitate procurement of supplemental resources for students and families.
- Participate in transitional processes, including intakes and transfers.
- Arrange for individual academic support as needed.
- Monitor credits earned, SSL hour completion, completer requirements and any credit recovery needs for graduation.
- Monitor all student withdrawals for the purpose of reclaiming dropouts.
- Participate in effective behavioral and conflict management/resolution efforts.
- Serve as active participant in school Student Support Team meetings to help develop and implement appropriate strategies and interventions.
- Assist in the coordination and supervision of special activities.

- Maintain all student and personnel documentation as required and submit in timely fashion.
- Maintain confidentiality of student information.
- Demonstrate courteous and professional demeanor to all stakeholders.
- Other duties as requested.

Terms: Grade 10, ESP Salary Scale, 7 hours/day, 10-month work year, with the possibility of addition days in the summer months.

Evaluation: Performance of this job will be evaluated in accordance with Board policy on Evaluation of Educational Support Personnel.

1/04, 12/04, 7/07

Appendix B

Principals' Invitation to Participate in the Study

August 1, 2013

(First and Last Name of Principal)

(Name of High School)

(Street Address)

(Town, Maryland, Zip Code)

Dear (Ms./Mr. Last Name):

I am pursuing a doctorate degree from the University of Maryland. A requirement of the doctoral program is to complete a research study and write a dissertation.

As a teacher, building-level administrator, and central office administrator, I have always been passionate about helping students at risk of dropping out of school to graduate. As a result of this passion, I will conduct my dissertation research in the area of supporting student graduation. My primary research question is: Based on principals' perceptions, what is the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing high school dropouts and increasing student graduation rates?

Given your experience as a high school building-level administrator, I am seeking your willingness to participate in the study. Participation in the study would require you to answer questions regarding your perceptions of the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing dropouts and increasing graduation rates. The study is not related to how student intervention specialists are used at various high schools or the performance of individuals currently employed in these positions.

During a face-to-face interview, I will ask five questions and record your responses electronically. At your convenience we will schedule about an hour and a half to two hours for the interview. Approximately two weeks after the interview, I will send you a paraphrased copy of your answers to confirm their accuracy. At that time you may add, delete, or edit your answers to best reflect your response to each question. In compliance with University of Maryland guidelines, I will secure all recordings and draft responses and destroy them at the appropriate time. I will assign an identification letter to your school. The collected responses will not include your name or the name of your school.

Participation in the study is voluntary. I have attached two consent forms that outline additional details surrounding the study. If you are willing to participate in the study, please sign one consent form and return it to me in the enclosed envelope. Keep the second copy for your records.

If you have any questions regarding the study or your potential participation, please contact me at 301-766-2820 or 301-791-4505. Thank you for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Boyd Michael

Doctoral Candidate

University of Maryland

Enclosure: Consent Form to Participate in Research Study

Appendix C

Consent Form to Participate in a Research Study

Project Title

High School Principals' Perceptions of the Role of the Student Intervention Specialist in Preventing Dropouts

Purpose of the Study

This research is being conducted by Boyd Michael as a doctoral candidate at the University of Maryland, under the supervision of Dr. Dennis Kivlighan. I am asking you to participate in this research project. I will be interviewing you regarding your perceptions of the role of the student intervention specialist in reducing dropouts and increasing graduation rates. The purpose of this research project is to determine both commonalities and differences in principals' perceptions and expectations of the student intervention specialist position. Through this effort, the researcher will determine critical responsibilities of the student intervention specialist.

Procedures

You will participate in one face-to-face, five-question interview with the researcher. The interview will last approximately one and a half to two hours and be audio recorded with your permission. You will choose the most convenient and comfortable location for the interview. The interview will take place during late summer 2013. The following is a sample interview question: From your perspective, what should the ideal role of the student intervention specialist be in maximizing efforts to reduce the number of dropouts and increase graduation rates?

The researcher will transcribe the interview verbatim from electronic recordings. After reviewing the transcripts, the researcher will paraphrase your responses to each question, providing coherent answers for future readers. You will receive drafts of the paraphrased responses for amendments, additions, and editing to ensure the responses are interpreted accurately.

Potential Risk and Discomforts

There may be some risks from participating in this research study. Your audio recorded responses to the questions, transcribed responses, and paraphrased documents could be lost, stolen, or viewed by someone other than the researcher. Significant efforts will be made to secure all information. But should confidentiality be compromised, because of the nature of the information, there is no known risk. Principals and schools will not be named in the report.

Potential Benefits

There are no direct benefits to you. However, the outcome of the study may benefit the system's ongoing effort to reduce dropouts and increase graduation rates.

Confidentiality

The researcher will use your responses only for the purposes of this study. All written and recorded information will be locked in a secure storage cabinet. Any information stored on a computer will be password protected. Your name and school name will not be included on the electronic recording, the transcription, or the paraphrased responses. The researcher will use a coding identification system for the recording, the transcription, and the paraphrased responses. Through the use of an identification key, the researcher will be able to link your responses to your school and

your identity. Only the researcher will have access to the identification key, and it will be kept in a secure location separate from the responses. To further protect your confidentiality, I will maintain this consent form separately from interview recordings, written drafts, and final responses.

If there is a report or article about this research project, your identity will be protected to the maximum extent possible. Your information may be shared with representatives of the University of Maryland, College Park or governmental authorities if you or someone else is in danger or if we are required to do so by law.

Right to Withdraw and Questions

Your participation in this research is completely voluntary. You may choose not to take part at all, or you may skip any question you are uncomfortable answering. If you decide to participate in this research, you may stop participating at any time. If you decide not to participate in this study or if you stop participating at any time, you will not be penalized or lose any benefits to which you otherwise qualify.

If you decide to stop taking part in the study, if you have questions, concerns, or complaints, or if you need to report an injury related to the research, please contact the investigator:

Dennis M. Kivlighan, Jr., Ph.D.

College of Education

3214 Benjamin Building

University of Maryland

College Park, Maryland, 20742

E-mail: dennisk@umd.edu

Telephone: 301-405-2863

Fax: 301.405.9995

Participant Rights

If you have questions about your rights as a research participant or wish to report a research-related injury, please contact:

University of Maryland College Park

Institutional Review Board Office

1204 Marie Mount Hall

College Park, Maryland, 20742

E-mail: irb@umd.edu

Telephone: 301-405-0678

This research has been reviewed according to the University of Maryland, College Park IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

Statement of Consent

Your signature indicates that you are at least 18 years of age; you have read this consent form or have had it read to you; your questions have been answered to your satisfaction and you voluntarily agree to participate in this research study. You will receive a copy of this signed consent form. If you agree to participate, please sign your name below.

Signature and Date

Name of Participant (Please Print): _____

Signature of Participant: _____

Date: _____

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