Dropping Out and Dropping In:
A Case Study of a Washington State School Districts' Efforts to Decrease High School Drop Out Rates

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Abstract

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Defining and accurately portraying the high school dropout crisis continues to be a challenging issue. Though high school dropout rates have decreased in recent years, they continue to remain high amongst low-income, underrepresented minority, English Language Learners. Though multiple reasons exist for addressing the high school dropout crisis, there are three reasons that make addressing the dropout issue of dire need and importance. Firstly, current accountability standards have the potential of directly increasing the number of individuals considered high school dropouts. Secondly, the dropout crisis affects not only individuals but also society as a whole resulting in lasting economic and societal cost. Lastly, current demographic shifts call for immediate attention of the dropout problem. As this country continues to diversify, it is urgent that dropout rates amongst these growing populations be addressed, specifically amongst the Latino population, the fastest growing population with the highest dropout rate. The purpose of this case study is to explore a school district's unique response to their high dropout rates. Through examining the role of Success Coordinator, a position developed as a direct response to the district's high dropout rates, this study seeks to understand the role of data in the practices and intervention methods employed in preventing students "at-risk" from dropping out and enabling students who have dropped out to re-engage into high school.

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DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to my loving parents, who sacrificed their dreams in order to give their children an opportunity to achieve theirs. To my nieces, Savannah and Sahara, and to my nephew, Madison, who motivate my desire for change.

Introduction

Educational attainment has long been seen as a method of social mobility. Higher levels of education have a direct correlation to increased economic prosperity. As one increases their educational level, income is more likely to increase. The path to increased educational attainment begins early in life and is persuaded by multiple factors. Initial investigations sought to understand how personal characteristic influenced educational attainment (Vartanian and Gleason, 1999). Researchers have suggested that a major element in student academic preparation is a strong parental influence (Allen et al., 2003; Hearn, 1984; Stage & Hossler, 1989). Additional influences such as personal aspirations and peer influences have also been found to be major elements in a students' academic preparation (Allen et al., 2003; Hearn, 1984; Stage & Hossler, 1989).

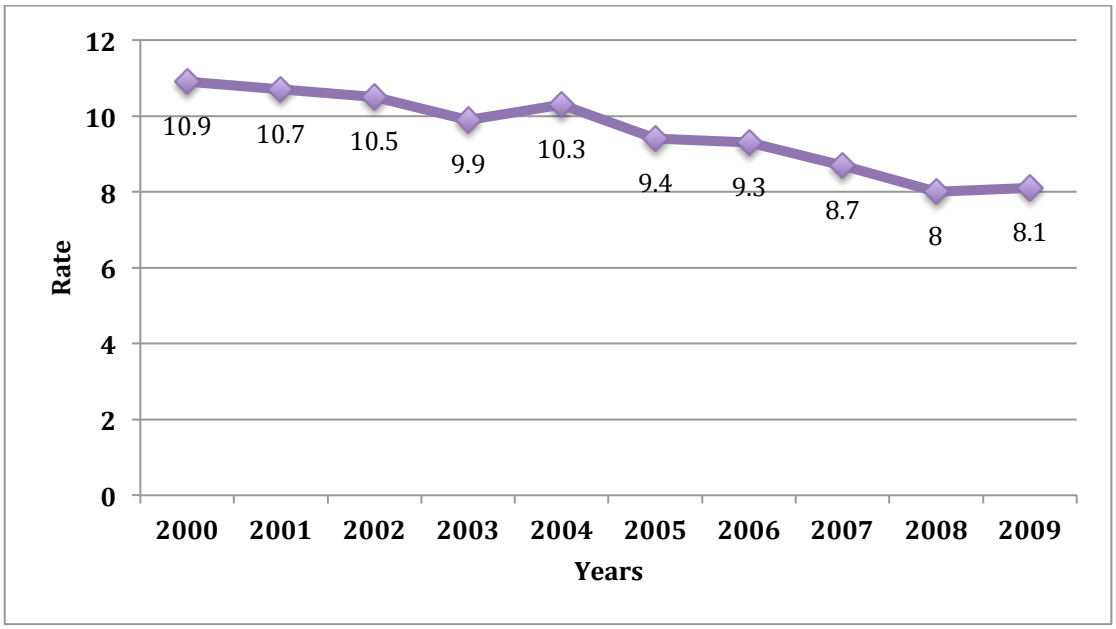
In past years, a shift has been made from personal characteristics to external factors on educational attainment (Vartanian and Gleason, 1999). External factors include "…learning environments students encounter, the rigor of the curriculum presented, or the degree to which the schools they attend expect and encourage high academic achievement and advanced learning" (Allen et al., 2003, p. 2; Hearn, 1991; McDonough, 1997). We must not only focus on personal characteristic but also on "fully understand[ing] (and change[ing]) the social processes that lend themselves to diminished educational attainment…" (Bohon et al.; 2006; p. 207).

According to the 2000 Census, educational levels within the United States population were at an all time high; however, disparities between gender and race continued to prevail. In a Census brief, Bauman and Graf (2003) reported that over 80% of the 182.2 million people aged 25 and over had earned a high school diploma or more. They note "…high school has gone from being the mark of the educated minority of the population to the minimum education level for 4 out of 5 adults" (p.2). As high school education becomes a minimal education level, it is

important to address high school attrition rates. Though high school completion rates are nearly equal between males and females, there is a large disparity amongst underrepresented populations, especially amongst Latino youth. Thus it is crucial, that we explore and assess what is occurring amongst students who are not completing high school.

Between 2000 and 2009, the national dropout rate dropped from 11 percent to 8 percent (Fig. 1.1). Additionally, dropout rates amongst underrepresented populations decreased with differing results by race/ethnicity (Fig. 1.2). Though these rates have decreased, a gap continues

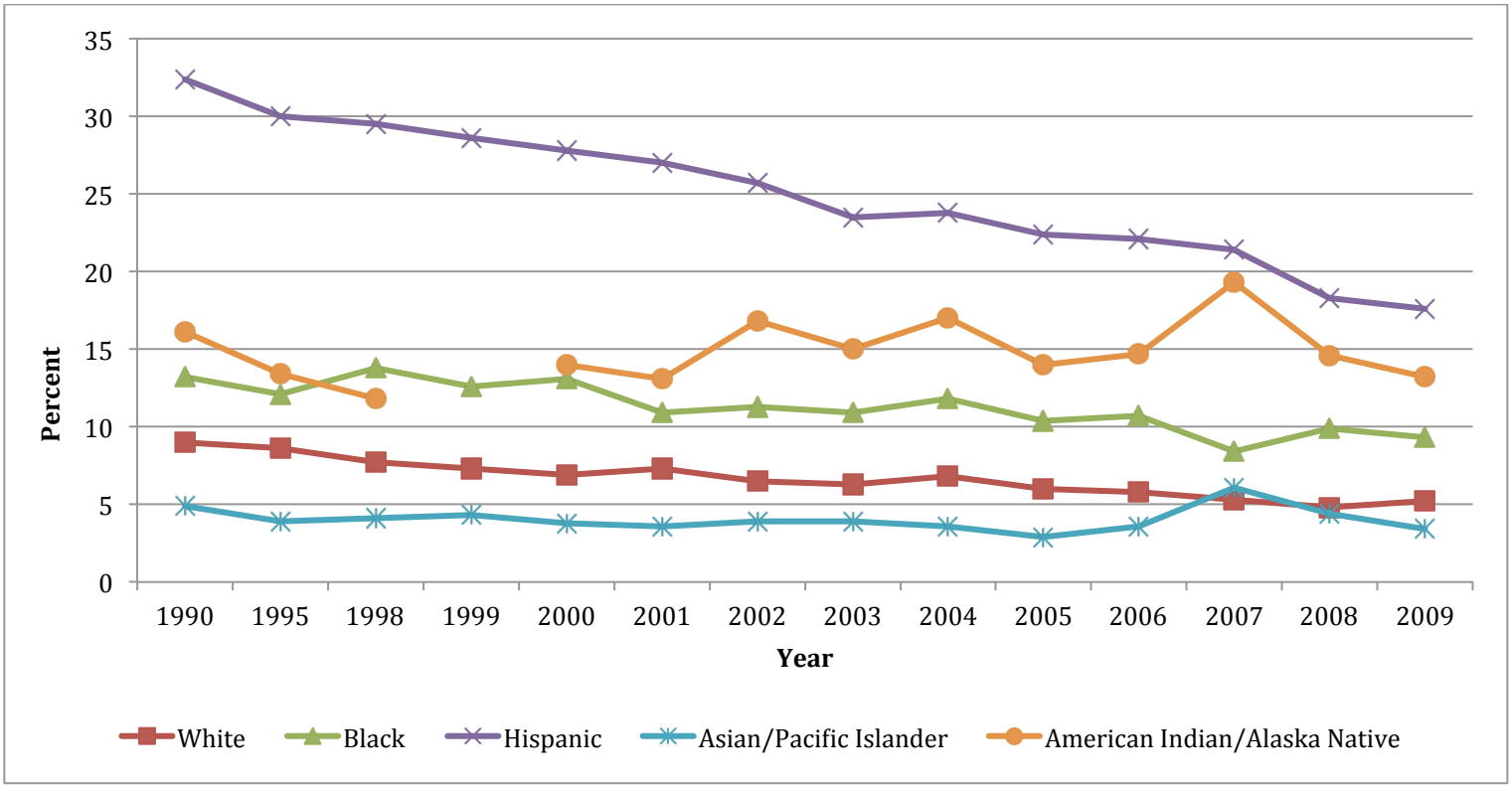
Figure 1.1: National Status Dropout Rates, 2000-2009



Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2011). The Condition of Education 2011 (NCES 2011-033), Table A-20-1.

to persist between White and underrepresented students with Latinos having the highest dropout rates amongst the underrepresented populations (US Census, 2010). According to the annual *The Condition of Education* Report, 50% of Latino male students compared to 27% of White males dropped out of high school. Furthermore, 41% of Latinas compared to 21% of White females dropped out of high school (Planty, Kena, & Hannes, 2009). These numbers become highly alarming when compared to the population projections and estimates. According to a

Figure 1.2: National Status Dropout Rates by Race/Ethnicity, 1990-2009

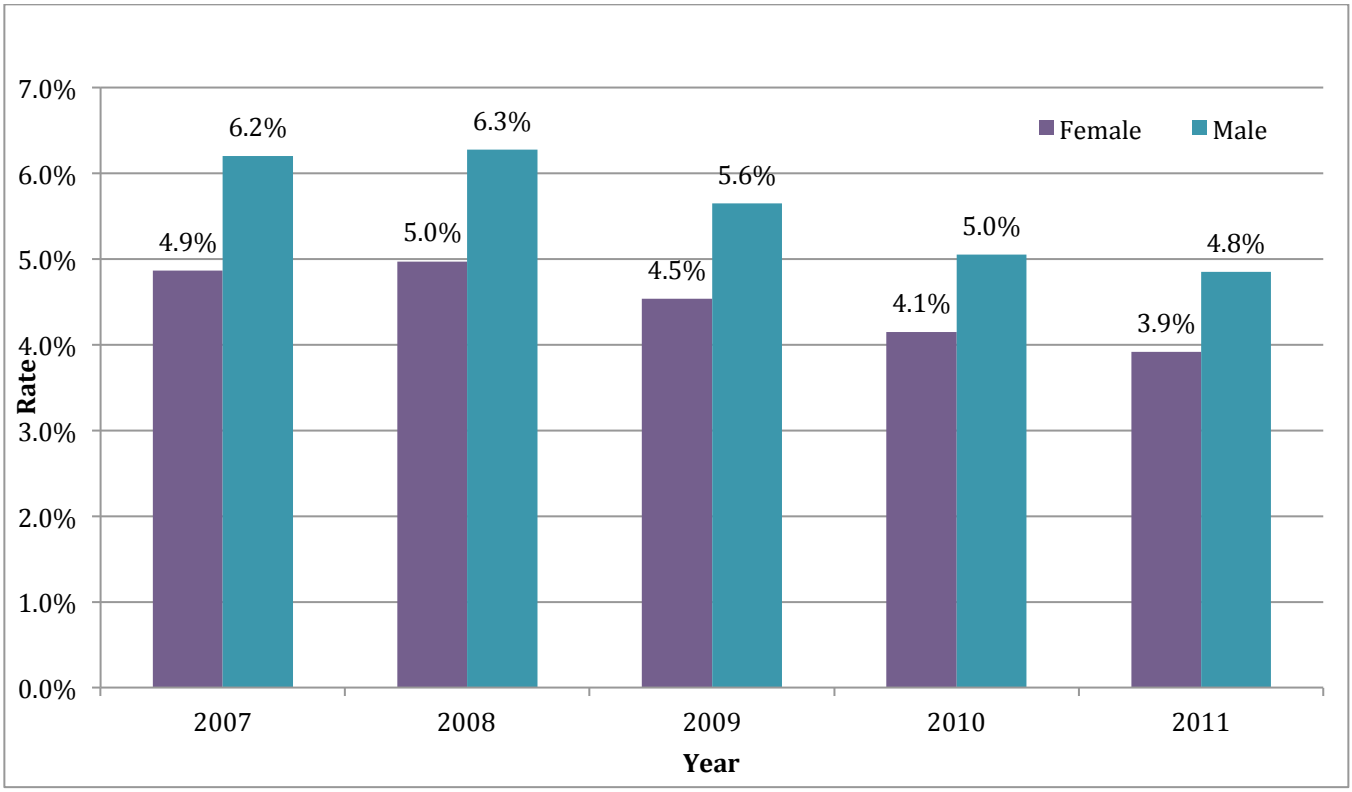


Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (2011). The Condition of Education 2011 (NCES 2011-033), Table A-20-1.

Pew Hispanic Center Study, the Latino population outpaced previous growth estimates growing by 43% from 2000 to 2010 (Passel & Cohn, 2011). If the Latino population continues to grow at such a rapid pace and dropout rates remain the same, Latinos will remain the group with the highest dropout rates and the highest proportion of individuals lacking a high school degree.

In examining dropout trends in the state of Washington, we find similar trends to those at the national level. Mirroring national trends by gender, Washington State presents higher dropout rates for males than females. According to data from the Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction (OSPI), dropout rates amongst males have decreased by 1.4% while females decreased by 1% between 2007 and 2011 (Fig. 1.3). Similar to national data, underrepresented students represent the highest proportion of high school dropouts. OSPI estimates for 2011

Figure 1.3: Washington State Annual Dropouts by Gender, 2007-2011*

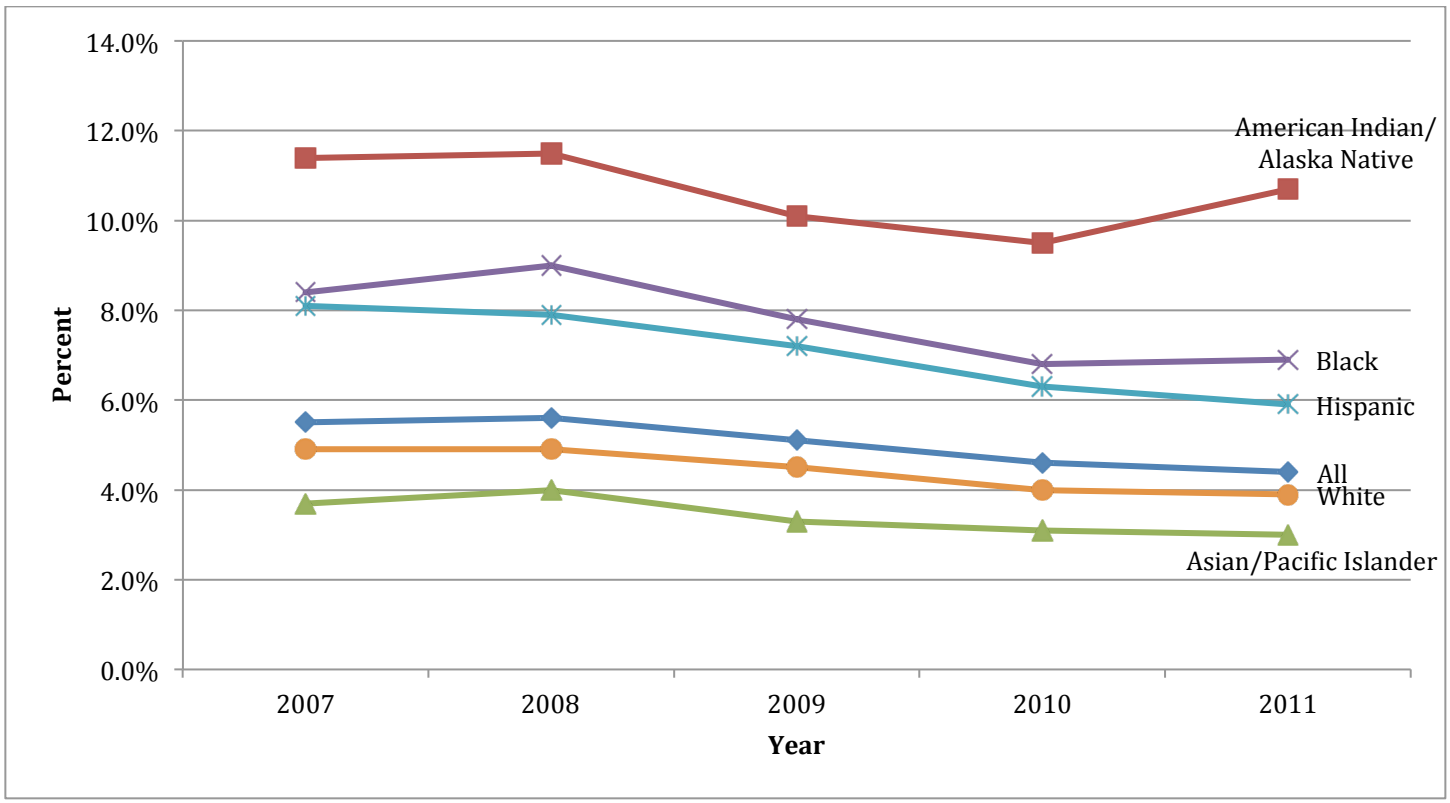


Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington, 07-11 Reports; *2011 estimates

report Blacks with the highest dropout rate followed by Hispanic, Whites, and Asian/Pacific Islander (Fig. 1.4). Though Native Americans/Alaska Native present the highest dropout percentage, we must be critical of these numbers and recognize the small population size they represent. Though Hispanics faired better than Blacks, it is necessary to acknowledge that Hispanics compose a larger proportion of the state population. Currently, 11.2% of the state's population identifies as Hispanic. That number is expected to increase by 150% by 2030 (U.S Census, 2010). In 2006 alone, only 49 percent of the Latino student's in the class of 2006 graduated high school (Swanson, 2009). That results in more than half of the Latino class of 2006 with less than a high school degree.

If the Latino population continues to grow at such a rapid pace and dropout rates amongst

Figure 1.4: Washington State Annual High School Dropouts by Race, 2007-2011*



Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington, 07-11 Reports; *2011 estimates

Latinos remain increasingly high; there can be serious social and economic impacts. These numbers show a need to address the current state of Latino dropout rates both nationally and in the state of Washington. Thus, understanding why students dropout, what can be done to prevent them from dropping out, but most importantly, what can be done to turn dropouts into drop ins (re-engage in school) becomes of dire and extreme importance; especially amongst the Latino population.

Chapter I:
High School Dropout Crisis

A high school dropout, as defined by the U.S. Department of Education is an individual between the ages of "16-24 who [is] not enrolled in school and [has] not earned a high school credential" (2011); however, defining a high school dropout is much more complex and not as simple as this definition appears to make it. According to Rumberger (2011), defining a high school dropout is dependent on the manner in which one chooses to view and define a high school dropout. He elaborates by suggesting that there are three ways to define a dropout: 1) considering dropout as a status, 2) considering dropout as an event, and 3) considering dropout as a process. These varying views of the dropout crisis result in inconsistent data on the true nature of the dropout crisis; thus, responding and measuring dropout rates is less straightforward and much more problematic.

High school students may dropout and reenroll at any given time during their academic career. They can easily change their academic label from enrolled to not enrolled; thus, a dropout is an individual who is labeled not enrolled and not yet having graduated high school. This label is equivalent to a status, a status comparable to an employment or marriage status (Rumberger, 2011). In employment, an individual is either employed or unemployed but always having the ability to alter their status by either finding an employment opportunity or by losing their employment. Being labeled a dropout is seemingly a change in status; students can be either "enrolled" or "not enrolled having not yet graduated"; however, these statuses can change with the ability to enroll or dropout at any given time, just as one can regain or lose employment status. Viewing dropouts as a status results in dropout analysis based on a snapshot in time. Data in these terms can expose trends by gender, race/ethnicity, neighborhood type, geographic location etc.

In considering dropout as an event, "one must consider the element of time" (Rumberger, 2011, p.51). The moment at which a student decides to end their academic career choosing to quit school prior to obtaining a high school diploma becomes an important factor in calculating dropout rates. Rates calculated using this definition highlight information regarding particular grade level dropouts, particular rates during a prescribed time period, "and whether those events are more prevalent among some groups of individuals, types of schools, or geographic locations than others" (p.48). In defining dropout as a process, Rumberger (2011) builds upon the understanding of what moment in time a student decides to disengage from school; however, in understanding why the event occurred, viewing dropout as a process requires a deeper understanding and review of the factors leading to the decision to quit school and not graduate from high school. Initiating early in life, individuals navigate the educational pathway/process commencing with Kindergarten that ultimately and ideally results in high school graduation. However, there are various factors that alter and influence an individual's academic pathway (Orfield, 2004; Rumberger 2004, 2011). Understanding dropout as a process "reveals what types of attitudes, behaviors, and school performance indicators precede the decision to quit school and when they occur" (p.48). Data obtained from this standpoint is holistic and gives way for creating an understanding that assists in tackling the needs of individuals choosing to dropout.

The lack of a concise and universal definition for dropouts results in a misleading picture of the high school dropout crisis. Data gathering is generally restricted to state and federal funding requirements that require the collection of enrollment, attendance, and free-lunch status; thus, resulting in a scare amount of data available and collected on most facets of schooling (Orfield, 2004). Overall school demographic data is collected in abundance but consistent individual schooling data is rarely collected. Additionally, dropout data collection guidelines are

set by individual states, which are later interpreted by local school districts. Resulting differences amongst states and local entities make painting an exact picture of the number of students who have dropped out of high school nearly impossible to calculate. The lack of consistent guidelines across all districts and states warrants the ability to categorize individuals not enrolled and not yet graduated into non-dropout categories. Dropout numbers will continue to misrepresent the true dropout reality due to administrators ability to re-categorize students, leading to an underreporting of the true dropout numbers.

Why is this important?

There are multiple reasons why addressing the high school dropout crisis is important, however, there are three main reasons that make addressing the dropout issue of dire need and importance. Firstly, current accountability standards have the potential of directly increasing the number of individuals considered high school dropouts. Secondly, the dropout crisis affects not only individuals but also society as a whole having lasting economic and societal cost. Lastly, current demographic shifts call for immediate attention of the dropout problem.

Accountability Standards

In recent years there has been a national and state push to end the educational policy of social promotion by increasing accountability standards. Social promotion has been a standard in educational policy for years, where student are promoted to the next level regardless of their low-academic achievement (Allensworth, 2004; Rumberger, 2004, 2011). New accountability standards, particularly high stakes testing, can potentially increase the number of students who dropout of high school (Rumberger & Lim, 2008).

Economic and Societal Costs

Dropping out is costly for the individual dropout and society as a whole. Dropouts experience higher levels of unemployment, are more likely to engage in criminal behavior resulting in incarceration, more likely to be divorced, and more likely to live in poverty in comparison to high school graduates (Orfield, 2004; Rumberger, 2011). In a US Census brief it was reported that "…high school has gone from being the mark of the educated minority of the population to the minimum education level for 4 out of 5 adults" (Bauman & Graf, 2003). That same year the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics estimated that adult dropouts averaged an annual earning of $18,800 (2003). In 2008, full-time high school graduates had a median annual earning 22% higher then a full-time dropout over one year (Aud et al., 2010). Rouse (2007) estimated that over their working lifetime, high school dropouts make $260,000 less than a high school graduate. Low levels of education lead to low wage jobs resulting in many high school dropouts inability to provide for their families, "and studies indicate that the economic and societal effects of dropouts' lost earning and taxes persist for many years" (Orfield, 2004, p. 2).

Additionally, the dropout problem creates substantial societal cost. In 2003, a study estimated that two-thirds of all inmates were high school dropouts (Western, Schiraldi, Ziendenberg, 2003). Furthermore, high school dropouts exhibit higher mortality rates and poorer levels of health, and are more likely to depend on public assistance programs. These are pressing concerns for citizens and taxpayers. Dropouts contribute far less in taxes; however, depend on heavily subsidized government assistance (Belfield & Levin, 2007; Rumberger, 2011). It is crucial to have a healthy and contributing citizenry in order to maintain a stable and functioning economy.

Demographic

As of the 2010 Census, the total population of the United States amounts to over 308.7 million and is projected to grow to 438 million by 2050 (Pew Hispanic Center, 2008). As the demographics rapidly change in the United States, Racial and Ethnic Minorities (REM) now account for nearly a third of the U.S population and are projected to compose 54% of the entire U.S. population by 2050 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008; Table 1A). It is widely documented that

Table 1A: National Population Distribution

Race/Ethnicity	Percent of Population
White	72.4%
Hispanic/Latino	16.3%
Asian	4.8%
Black	12.6%
American Indian/Alaska Native	0.9%
Native Hawaiian/Other Pacific Islander	0.2%
Total Racial and Ethnic Population	**34.8%**

Source: U.S. Census Bureau: State and County QuickFacts, 2010.

much of the racial and ethnic minority population experiences higher levels of poverty and lower educational attainment rates (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Contreras, 2011). As the proportion of racial, ethnic, and linguistic minorities increases so is the proportion of individual exhibiting characteristics that have been found to lead to dropping out (Aud et al., 2010). It is well documented that an educated populace is necessary to ensure participation in today's skilled and technologically advanced global economy (Gándara & Contreras, 2009). Given that the growing trend of minority students is expected to continue, educational success is the key for Racial and Ethnic Minorities adjustability to today's diverse society.

Chapter II:
Relevant Literature

Educational preparedness is key to the success of students and begins with early childhood education and persists through secondary education. A range of factors including classroom interactions, peer interactions, and schooling type influence not only how schools position students but also how students place themselves (Koyama, 2006). This is particularly true for students with perceived class, race and gender disadvantages. Further, "…learning environments students encounter, the rigor of the curriculum presented, or the degree to which the schools they attend expect and encourage high academic achievement and advanced learning" are crucial in developing academically prepared students (Allen et al., 2003, p. 2). A student's cultural capital or understanding of the educational system as well as access to individuals and networks (social capital), manifest in students self placement within this complex system.

In recognizing that educational attainment is influenced by both academic and social factors, we must also recognize that those same factors influence an individual's decision to dropout of high school. The decision to dropout is not simply influenced by individual, familial and institutional factor; thus, dropping out "must also be understood by studying the views and interpretations of those conditions and behaviors by dropout themselves" (Rumberger, 2011, p. 10). Understanding a dropouts motives in disengaging from school requires "dropping out" be understood as a process rather than as a single status or event.

"At-Risk" Indicators

Attendance, grade point average, and number of failed courses have been identified as early high school indicator for "at risk" students (Johnson & Semmelroth, 2010; Heppen, O'Cummings, & Therriault, 2008; Jerald, 2006; Neild, Balfanz, & Herzog, 2007' Contreras et al., 2012); however, it is important to note dropouts present unique characteristic. Dropouts are

influenced by individual, familial, societal and institutional factors and identifying those factors may lead to adequate prevention mechanisms. Moreover, racial and ethnic minorities present unique characteristics not displayed in other adolescent youth. An analysis by Fry (2003) found that Latino youth in the U.S. are more likely to drop out of school than any other youth. Latino youth are likely to have limited English proficiency and work close to equivalent full time hours while attending school (Fry and Lowell, 2002). Additionally, the Latino youth population is highly male and experiences higher poverty rates (Fry, 2003). It is important that these differences be taken into consideration when determining best practices in decreasing the dropout rate, but specifically when addressing the Latino dropout rates.

Individual Characteristics

Among the various individual factors identified as crucial to the dropout problem, gender, attitude and behavior, mobility, academic achievement, and absenteeism have been identified as key identifying characteristics. Various studies have found differences in educational attainment between males and females. Male are much more likely to dropout of high school (Orfield, 2004; Rumberger, 2004). Burke (1989) suggests that gender identity has crucial effects on the academic performance of adolescents. He defines gender identity as a "sex role identification-the gender related attitudes, meanings and expectations that one holds for oneself" (p.160). Gender identity is shaped by multiple factors including societal norms. Thus, the high dropout rate amongst males can be said to be influenced by the expected male role. Males are expected to provide for the family and as such research illustrates, males tend to dropout in order to sustain their families (Dalton et al., 2009)

Individual attitudes and behaviors have shown to contribute to a students low academic engagement; lack of engagement results in low educational and occupational aspirations in high

school (Rumberger, 2004; 2011). These attitudes influence a student's academic performance, which is generally measured by a student's grade point average (GPA). GPA is a concrete measure of student ability and grades can indicate a students probability of succeeding (Fehrman et al., 1987). Lack of achievement or low early achievement such as failing courses in elementary and middle school, are indicators of poor high school performance. An individual's actual performance is a statement of their individual ability (Wilson & Portes, 1975) and commitment to perform according to established standards. Further, academic retention has been shown to have a short term positive impact; however, a long term negative effect, resulting in students who have experienced grade retention demonstrating higher rates of dropout incidents (Rumberger, 2011).

Student mobility has been shown to increase the likelihood of students dropping out. In a study conducted by Rumberger and Larson (1998), they found that students attend two or more school prior to dropping out. Additionally, residential mobility and school mobility, change in residence and change in school, increases the chances of an individual dropping out of high school (Haveman, Wolfe, & Spaulding, 1991; Rumberger, 1995; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Rumberger, 2011). During this transitional time individuals miss a larger portion of instruction. Though students may be enrolled, this does not mean they are attending school. Absenteeism is by far the leading indicator for dropping out (Orfield, 2004, Rumberger, 2004, 2011).

Familial Characteristics

Literature has long identified the importance of family variables on educational attainment. Parental education is seen as a critical predictor as they can serve as role models for increased educational attainment (Vartanian and Gleason, 1999). Teachman (1987) states that "parents

with more education and income probably have more ability and motivation to create educational resources" (p.549). A study by Wojtkiewicz and Donato (1995) found that all participants with parents with at least a college degree were more likely to graduate from high school. Additionally, respondents with parents who had dropped out of high school were also less likely to graduate from high school. Individuals whose parents have increased levels of educational attainment benefit from the additional support these parents can provide. For example, students are more likely to be assisted with homework assignments and are more likely to have access to after school programs, such as tutoring services.

In addition, past studies have identified nativity as a powerful predictor of educational attainment. Wojtkiewicz and Donato (1995) studied the effects of nativity on Hispanic educational attainment. Findings implied that ''...both foreign-born Mexicans and foreign-born Puerto Ricans were found to be less likely to graduate from high school…'' (p. 569). Further, they found that ''...foreign-born Mexicans with foreign-born parents had significantly lower chances of high school graduation than US-born whites" (p. 570). Their study did show one key difference between parental and child nativity. Respondents with foreign-born parents yet having been born in the United States had a higher likelihood of graduating from high school than native-born whites.

Institutional Characteristics

Early researchers such as Wilson (1987) and most recently Rumberger (2011) contend that institutional factors play a role in educational attainment. Though all students have equal access to public education, the quality of schooling changes and is reflective of the neighborhood in which it is located. Riordan (1997) states that the ''...issue is [not] whether or not equality is possible when some students are constrained to attend poor inner city schools and others attend

affluent suburban schools...'' (p. 7). He notes that families from affluent background are more likely to enroll their students in private institutions while children who lack the economic prosperity are left to attend inner city schools with limited resources.

Neighborhood Characteristics

Literature makes a connection between educational attainment and disadvantaged neighborhoods but falls short in identifying the factors that lead to a lack of educational attainment and and individual's decision to drop out (Ainsworth, 2002). Reeves & Breschel (1999) note that there is a need to further understand the "processes within disadvantaged neighborhoods that connect structural characteristics of neighborhoods – such as high rates of poverty, joblessness, and single parenthood – to lower levels of schooling…" (p.3). Social isolation theory provides an initial starting point for the analysis of neighborhood effects on educational attainment. Vartanian and Gleason (1999) state that social isolation theory "predict that living in poor neighborhoods decreases the chances that a young person will graduate from high school or college" (p. 22). Wilson (1987) argues that these negative effects are due to the lack of adult role models living in socially isolated neighborhoods. "Disadvantaged communities may influence children and adolescent development through the lack of resources or negative peer influences" (Rumberger, 2011, p. 10; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Hallinan & Williams, 1990; Wilson, 1987). He continues by stating that the lack of positive role models facilitates the high school drop out rates. A child's adolescent stage is a critical stage in their life and the lack of positive role models can have detrimental effects on their future success. Vartanian and Gleason (1999) found in their study that ''...neighborhood conditions directly affect the educational inclination of students'' (p. 21). Their findings indicate that living in

disadvantaged neighborhoods is a dissuading factor in educational attainment and influences individuals' chances of dropping out of high school.

Early Warning Systems

"The Early Warning System (EWS) tool, developed by the National High School Center, uses early high school indicators to identify students at risk for dropout or on-time graduation" (Contreras, Chavez, & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 4; as cited in Johnson & Semmelroth, 2010). This system is highly effective when working with efficient and accurate longitudinal student data systems. In recent years, the Data Quality Campaign, a non-profit, non-partisan, national advocacy organization, has assisted states in developing quality longitudinal data systems. The organization promotes longitudinal student data systems as a "systemic approach that may decrease the dropout rates and increase graduation rates" among all students, specifically Latino students (Contreras, Chavez, & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 4). Development of assessment practices, using longitudinal data systems, in early educational stages can help these students (Contreras, Chavez, & Rodriguez, 2012; as cited in Hoffman, 2005). States such as Texas and Florida have developed efficient and accurate data collection systems that track students overtime with educational identifiers. Florida's Education Data Warehouse (EDW) is one of the most advanced systems collecting student level data such as demographics, enrollment, curriculum, test scores, employment, and financial information (Contreras, Chavez, & Rodriguez, 2012; as cited by the FL Dept. of Ed.). "Their efficient and accurate data system has allowed them to effectively create programs that identify 'at risk' students and seeks to intervene at an earlier stage" (Contreras, Chavez, & Rodriguez, 2012, p. 4).

Conceptual Framework

This thesis explores the role and practices of Success Coordinators in order to understand

the intervention efforts implemented in an effort to decrease high school dropout rates at four high schools within an urban ring school district in the state of Washington. Building upon existent dropout literature identifying "at-risk" individual, family, school and institutional warning signals (Orfield, 2004; Rumberger 1995, 2004, 2011; Swanson & Schneider, 1999; Rumberger & Larson, 1998; Haveman, Wolfe, & Spaulding, 1991); literature on effective data usage (Data Quality Campaign); and existing data on intervention methods (Orfield, 2004; Rumberger, 2004; 2011), this study seeks to expand the literature on data driven intervention efforts.

Figure 2.1: Conceptual Framework

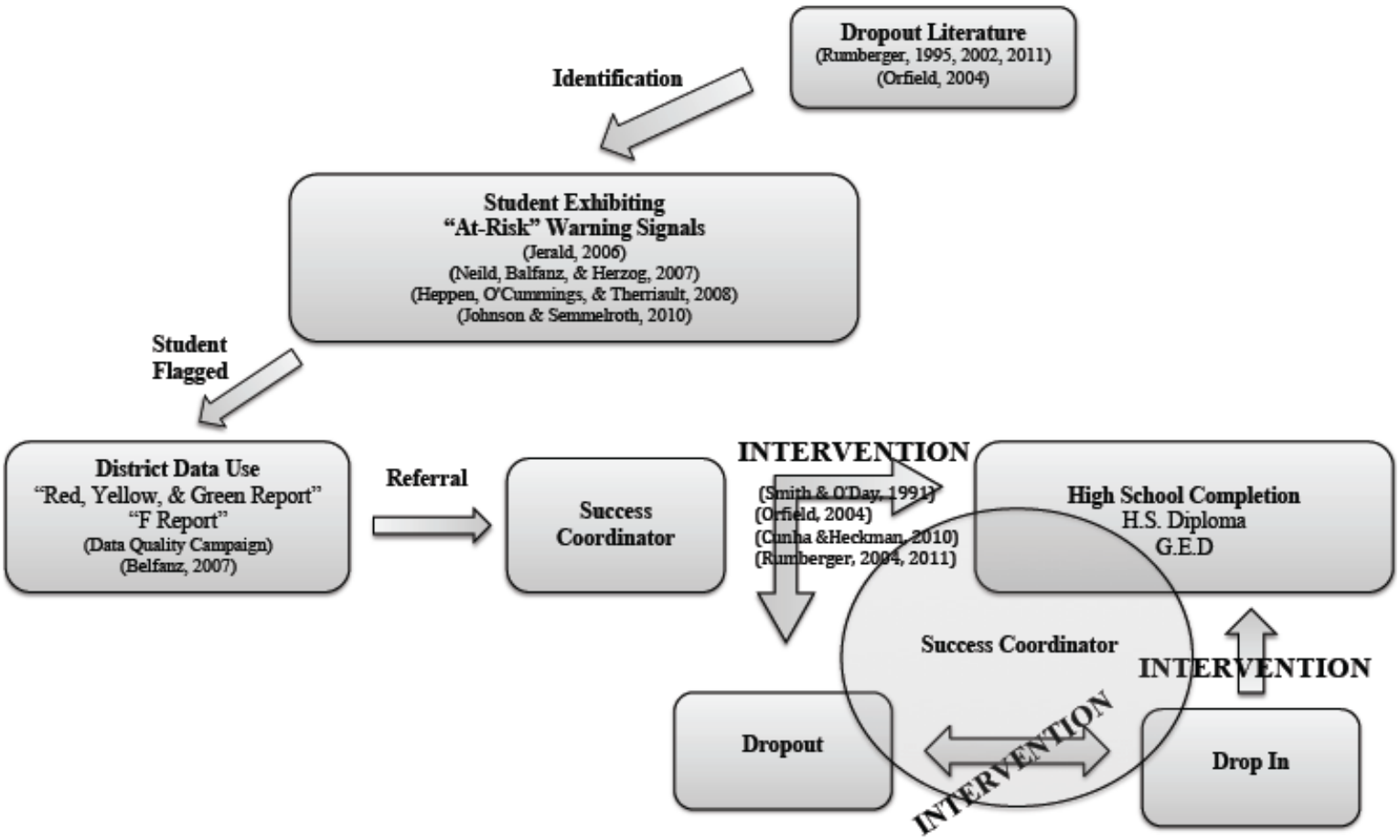


Figure 2.1 illustrates the process taken by district, school, and Success Coordinators in identify "at-risk" students in order to assist them in graduating. The initial process begins with the districts understanding of the dropout crisis, which allows them to then, identify and flag students who exhibit early warning signals (individual and institutional factors). Using data driven reports, such as the "Red, Yellow, and Green Report" and "F Report," students are identified and flagged by district and school leaders and referred for intervention. Once the Success Coordinators have identified these students, individual meeting are scheduled between the student and Success Coordinators in order to determine the best intervention method for the "at-risk" student. At this point of the process, there is an interdependent relationship that develops, where both Success Coordinators and "at-risk" students rely heavily on the engagement between one another. After a Success Coordinators intervention, a student can recover and successful graduate or dropout. If a student dropouts, the Success Coordinator then attempts to reengage the student, trying to have the student drop back into school. The student can decide to reengage at which point, the Success Coordinator individually monitors the student and provides additional intervention tactics (individualistic intervention approach). Ultimately, the student can successfully graduate or once again, drop out of high school. It's important to note that the act of dropping out and dropping in can occur multiple times during a students high school stay. The central research questions for this thesis were:

1) What role, if any, do Success Coordinators play in preventing dropouts and enabling dropouts to reenter the educational system?

2) What practices are being implemented?

    a) How is CEDARS data used to inform these practices?

3) What trends are seen amongst the dropout population?

4) What are the challenges faced in assisting the "at-risk" and dropout population?

Chapter III:
Case Study

Rationale for Study

This qualitative collective case study is important and necessary for several reasons. First, a gap exists in qualitative analysis of the dropout issue and intervention responses created to address this issue. The majority of literature available on dropouts focuses on identifying the critical points at which students become susceptible of dropping out. Additionally, quantitative analysis has been used to identify the predictive factors that influence a student's probability of dropping out. However, there is a limited amount of literature speaking directly to the role of leaders within dropout prevention programs. Most research identifies the quality of programs by assessing attrition rates and the organizational structure of the program; however, these studies do not examine the processes engaged in by those responsible for the realization of these intervention programs. There is a limited amount of research, precisely in the current body of qualitative research, which identifies the role and processes of those held responsible for carrying out these intervention programs and strategies.

Rationale for Qualitative Methods

The purpose of qualitative research is to explore and understand the meaning individuals ascribe to a social problem (Creswell, 2009). In doing so, this method examines both the social settings and the individuals within the setting. It assesses how individuals see themselves, see others, make sense of their surroundings, and judge their importance within the setting. Further, Berg (2007) explains that:

> Qualitative procedures provide a means for accessing unquantifiable facts about the actual people researchers observe and talk to or people represented by their personal traces (…). As a result, a qualitative techniques allow researchers to share in the understandings and perceptions of others and to explore how people structure and give meaning to their daily lives (p.8).

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore a school district's unique response to their dropout rates. Through examining the role of Success Coordinator, a position developed as a direct response to the districts high dropout rates, a better understanding can be developed of the impact this position has in preventing "at-risk" students from dropping out and enabling students who have dropped out to re-engage into school. In order to achieve a comprehensive understanding of this intervention method, it is necessary to examine the trends, challenges, function and practices of the Success Coordinators. Additionally, the study seeks to understand how Success Coordinators use the Washington State Longitudinal Data System, CEDARS, to assist their mission. Moreover, further investigation is sought to understand the extent of use, training, and data accessibility to CEDARS provided to Success Coordinators by the individual high school and district. The implications of the study may lead to the improvement and/or enhancement of the Success Coordinator position. Additionally, effective practices Success Coordinators engage in may be identified which may lead to new intervention efforts and practices.

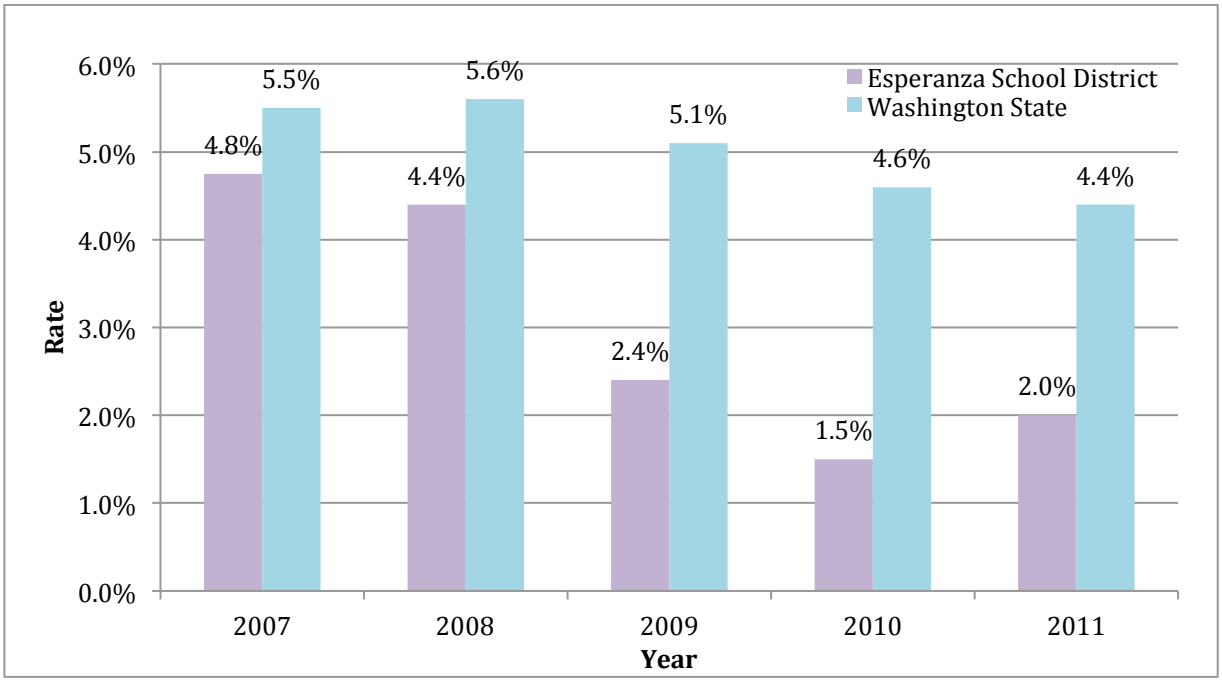
Case Study Profile: Esperanza School District

In an effort to protect the participants of this case study, pseudonyms have been used for the protection of the school district, high schools, and Success Coordinator.

Esperanza School District is a district with dropout rates amongst the lowest and below the state average (Fig 3.1). Located in Western Washington, this urban ring district "is considered to be among the model school districts in the state of Washington for effective data collection and management" (Contreras et al., 2012). Approximately 51.5% of students are male and 48.5% are female. Though the student body is predominately White (63.5%), the school

district is situated in a highly diverse region. Demographic data from 2009-2010, show a diverse student population with 13.5% Hispanic, 12.1% Asian or Pacific Islander, 4.1% Black, and 1.1% American Indian or Alaskan Native. About 35.3% of students qualify for free or reduced priced

Figure 3.1: Washington State and Esperanza School District Annual High School Dropout Rate Comparison, 2007-2011*



Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington, 07-11 Reports; *2011 based on estimates

meals and 9.3% are enrolled in transition bilingual programs. In reviewing annual high school dropout rates, Esperanza School District rates are significantly lower by race/ethnicity, gender, English language proficiency and socioeconomic status (Table 3A).

Table 3A: Washington State and Esperanza School Districts Annual High School Dropout by Race/Ethnicity and Gender, 2009-2010

	Washington State	Esperanza School District
Race/Ethnicity		
American Indian	9.5%	5.3%
Asian/Pacific Islander	3.1%	0.4%
Black	6.8%	1.4%
Hispanic	6.3%	2.5%

White	4.0%	2.8%
Gender		
Female	4.1%	1.1%
Male	5.0%	2.0%
Other		
Limited English Proficiency	7.5%	2.9%
Low Income	5.6%	1.6%

Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington, 2010 Report

Esperanza School District High School Profiles

Esperanza School District operates four high schools spanning two cities. During the 2009-2010 academic year, over 5400 high school students within these four high schools were served (Table 3B). Three high schools, Amali, Elpida, and Sonomi are traditional schools while

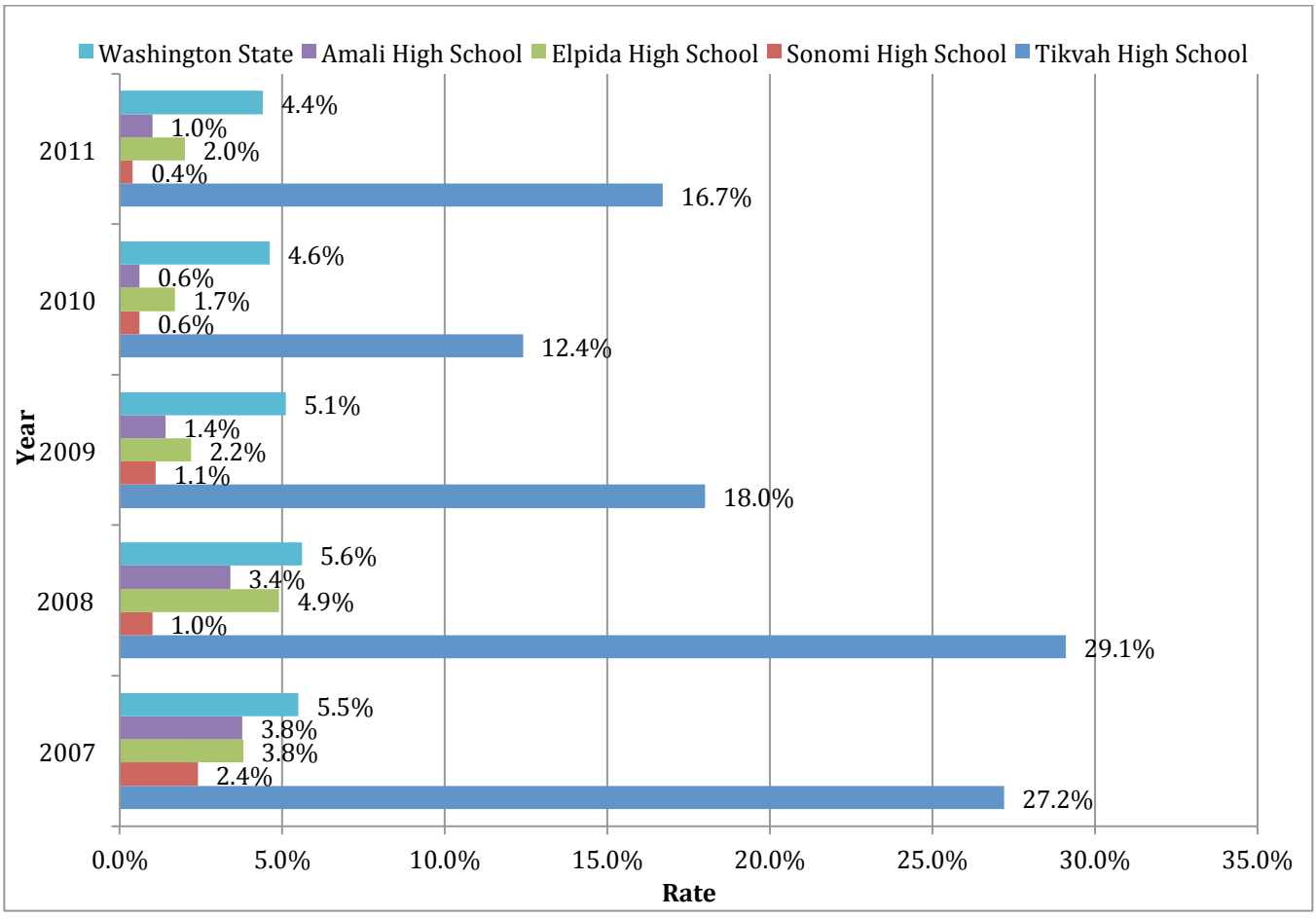
Table 3B: Esperanza School District High School Demographic by School, 2009-2010

	Amali	**Elpida**	**Sonomi**	**Tikvah**
Gender (Oct 1st)				
Male	886	803	987	155
Females	879	716	890	152
Grade				
9	465	418	480	10
10	476	387	508	43
11	444	394	460	83
12	401	366	479	176
Race/Ethnicity (Oct 1st)				
American Indian/Alaskan Native	16	28	17	3
Asian/Pacific Islander	221	118	420	14
Black	125	80	66	14
Hispanic	195	188	132	35
White	1,208	1,105	1,242	241
Lunch Program Eligibility				
Free Lunch	546	637	238	186
Reduced-Price Lunch	157	123	92	42
Free & Reduced	703	760	330	228

Source: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Common Core of Data (CCD), "Public Elementary/Secondary School Universe Survey"

Tikvah, is an alternative school. Amali High School, serving the largest number of Hispanic and Black populations amongst all high schools, is comprised of a student body that is 68.4% White, 12.5% Asian/Pacific Islanders, 11% Hispanic, 7.1% Black, and .09% American Indian/Alaska Native. Elpida High School had 760 students, the largest of all high schools, eligible for free and reduced price lunch. Elpida is overwhelmingly White (72.7%), followed by Hispanic (12.4%), Asian/Pacific Islander (7.8%), Black (5.3%), and American Indian/Native Alaskan (1.8%). With the largest number of Asian/Pacific Islanders amongst all high schools, Sonomis' population is 66.2% White, 22.4% Asian/Pacific Islander, 7% Hispanic, 3.5% Black, and .9% American Indian/Native American.

Figure 3.2: Washington State and Esperanza District High Schools' Annual Dropout Rate Comparison, 2007-2011*



Source: Office of Superintendent of Public Instruction, Graduation and Dropout Statistics for Washington, 07-11 Reports; *2011 based on estimates

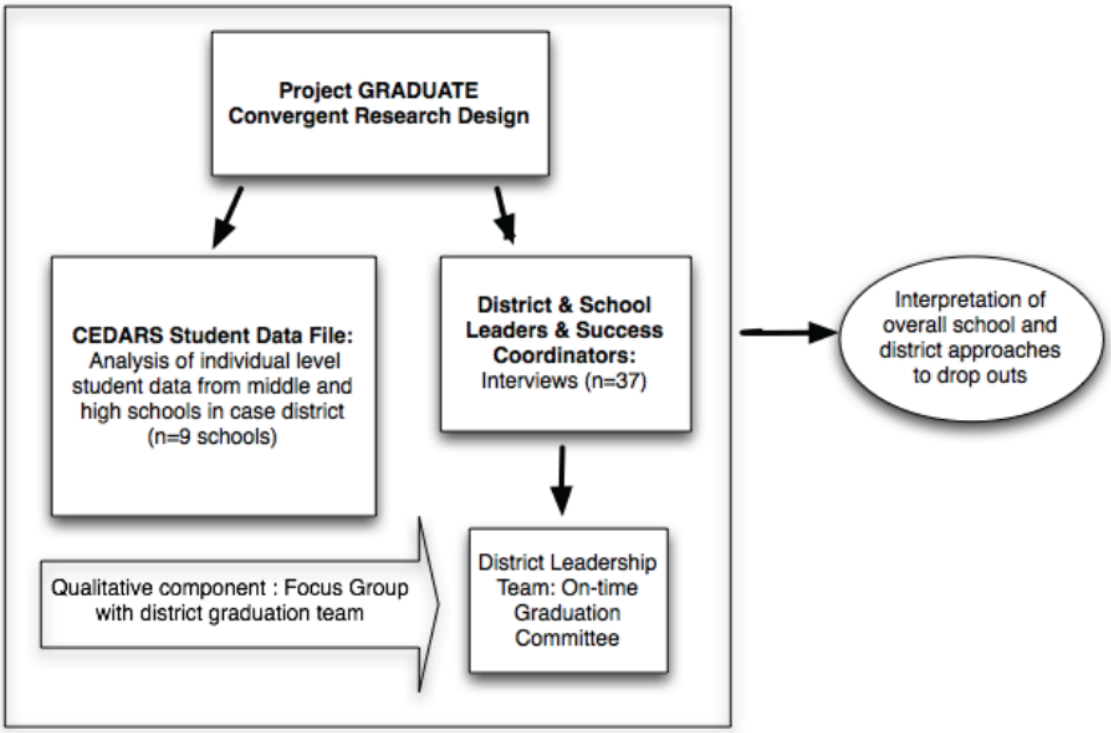
Mirroring the states and overall district's high school dropout rate comparison all three traditional high schools have dropout rates lower than the state average, the exception being Tikvah, the alternative school (Fig. 3.2). The 2009-2010 academic school year data displays the lowest annual high school dropout rates amongst the traditional schools within the last five years, with the 2010-2011 academic school year estimates showing slight increases for two out of the three traditional high schools. Overall, all traditional high schools are well below the state's annual high school dropout rates.

Chapter IV:
Methodology

Research Design

The data for this study was obtained from Project GRADUATE, a study commissioned and funded by the Washington State Commission on Hispanic Affairs and the Gates Foundation, under the direction of Dr. Frances Contreras. This collective case study utilized a convergent mixed-method design and sought to assess the data collection and assessment practices within a school district from an urban ring setting in Western Washington State. A collective case study "involves extensive study of several instrumental cases, intended to allow better understanding, insight, or perhaps improved ability to theorize about a broader context" (Berg, 2007, p. 292). Additionally, Berg (as cited in Yin, 2003) explains that using several cases allows for common perceptions amongst individual cases to be established. This design facilitated the exploration of several cases within one district.

Figure 4.1: Project GRADUATE Research Design



Source: Contreras, F. et. al., (2012). Figure 2: Project GRADUATE Mixed Method Research Design and Components:

The convergent mixed-method design allowed for comprehensive analysis by collecting both qualitative and quantitative data simultaneously (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2006). The qualitative component of the project consisted of individual interviews of administrators and staff members within three levels of the school district: district, high school, and middle school levels (Contreras, Chavez, and Rodriguez, 2012). A total of thirty-seven interviews (n=37) were conducted and participants were asked questions pertaining to data collection, accuracy, and usage (Contreras, Chavez, and Rodriguez, 2012).

Table 4A: Participant Distribution by School District Level

	District	High School	Middle School
Administrator	7	4	5
Staff	2	8	5
Success Coordinator		4	2

Case Selection: Success Coordinators

Using a criterion-sampling scheme (Creswell, 2007) with job title and work site, Success Coordinator and high school, as the determining factors for participation, four semi-structured interviews were conducted February 2012. Recruitment for this study was carried out at the school district level and was coordinated by the Student Records Coordinator. The coordinator served as a liaison and arranged interview dates and times according to interviewer and participant schedules. Interviews were carried out individually at the Success Coordinator's respective school site. The research protocol asked demographic questions from general background to education-focused questions. General background questions include items such as gender, age, location of birth, race/ethnicity, and place of employment. The educational-related questions include items regarding degree attainment, degree-granting institution attended, and identification of special certification attainment. Additional questions regarding job responsibilities, training, student challenges and trends, drop in population, and data use

practices were asked. Participation in the study was strictly voluntary with no compensation offered.

Sample Characteristics

The sample encompassed Esperanza School District's four high school Success Coordinators for On-Time Graduation. Table 4B provides an overview of background characteristics of the sample. All participants self identified as female, Caucasian, and spoke only English. All respondents obtained a bachelors degree, half having earned a Masters degree. One respondent held her position for six years, since the initial creation of the position, while two had been in the position for five years, and the fourth, being new at the position, having been hired two and a half months prior to the interview. The respondents ranged from age 28 to 55.

Table 4B: Select background characteristics of interview participants

Gender	Age	Race/Ethnicity	Time in Position	Education	Language Spoken
Female	28	White	2.5 month	Masters in School Psychology	English
Female	33	Caucasian	5 years	Bachelors	English
Female	42	Caucasian	5 Years	Masters in Counseling	English
Female	55	Caucasian Irish American	6 years	Bachelors	English

Data Analysis

Data collected was analyzed through content analysis. "Content analysis is a careful, detailed, systematic examination and interpretation of a particular body of material in an effort to identify patterns, themes, biases, and meanings" (Berg, 2007, p. 304; Leedy & Ormrod, 2005;

Neuendorf, 2002). Using content analysis, the data was coded for emergent themes. These themes will be based on major findings displayed throughout the four interviews. The emergent themes were grouped into comprehensive constructs with multiple sub constructs that described the objective, responsibilities, and practices of the Success Coordinators in preventing and helping "at-risk" and dropout students. While identifying themes, initial matrices were developed by individual participant interview. Upon review of individual participant matrices, an overall matrix of themes was created that reflected major themes that were consistent for all participants (Miles & Huberman, 1994). In validating the findings, qualitative researchers utilize various validation strategies to make their studies credible and rigorous (Creswell & Miller, 2000). The data was triangulated with the various forms of data that were collected in this study (i.e., interviews, demographic sheets, and field notes). Detailed descriptions were used to accurately portray the Success Coordinators voice under each theme. The final analysis reflects the foremost themes that emerged from the Success Coordinator responses.

Chapter V:
Findings & Discussion

Emergent Themes

Select passages included in this section are direct excerpts based upon an analysis I provided for a paper presented at the American Educational Research Association, along with Dr. Frances Contreras, Associate Professor, University of Washington and Jessica Rodriguez, Ph.D student, University of Washington. These passages are cited from:

Contreras, F., Chavez, E., & Rodriguez, J. (2012, April). Preventing middle & high school dropouts through data collection, oversight and intervention (pp. 15-21). In M.S. Sanders (Chair), *The Latino Student Journey to Higher Education*. Paper session at the meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Vancouver, B.C., Canada.

Various themes emerged from the semi-structured interviews with Success Coordinators for On-Time Graduation that exposed differing practices, duties, and expectations within one position. It is important to acknowledge that Esperanza School District, an urban ring school district in Washington State, spans across two very diverse cities and though all respondents work within the same school district, each school confronts their own unique challenges. The key emerging themes are: (1) Success Coordinators have multiple roles and responsibilities, (2) the "at-risk" population exhibits distinct characteristics, with English Language Learners (ELL) being the largest population "at-risk" of dropping out, (3) "every single kid is different," (4) the persistent challenges in combating drop outs are student attitudes, lack of parental involvement, and accountability testing, (5) data use and availability, and lastly, (6) the need for relevant professional development in order to best serve the "at-risk" student population.

Role of Success Coordinators

With Esperanza School District's wide-ranging diversity, the role of Success Coordinators varied across each high school campus. As noted by one Success Coordinator, "I'm the Graduation Success Coordinator, and it's different from school to school." Each Success Coordinator's responsibilities varied and were determined according to a particular

school's needs. Half were assigned to work with the entire high school population, another worked almost exclusively with junior and seniors students, and one particular Success Coordinator was responsible for engaging middle school students as an early intervention method. In one particular school, the newly hired Success Coordinator along with administrative leaders decided to "re-define this coordinator position." This school has not only taken on the task of redefining this position but also "creating a different culture, a proactive, let's get them before they fail" culture.

Helping Students Graduate

All Success Coordinators expressed the need for students to obtain their high school education, whether it is through completing their high school diploma or an alternative program. Though all expressed that their main responsibility was "work[ing] with students to ensure on time graduation," they also acknowledge that not all students will be able to obtain a high school diploma due to the circumstances they find themselves in. As such, their responsibility then shifted to "try[ing] to find them an educational program that suits their needs that they're willing to participate in."

> We push for students to find a route in an educational world so that they can complete their high school diploma….But if I think a kid is either just going to disappear and go wherever, if I don't think that-- they've made it very clear that they are not coming…'like I refuse to be a fifth year senior, there's no way I will do that.' Then I will say well what about EdCAP because you can get your diploma and you can be working on college credits at the same time. So the kids can finish a diploma and be partway through their AA by the time that they're done.

Every effort is made to keep a student enrolled and on track to graduate with a high school diploma; however, all Success Coordinators expressed the need to be clear and realistic with an individual's possibility to graduate on time but most importantly, graduate altogether. Every effort is made to assist students; tutoring and credit recovery options are offered, but

throughout, there was an agreement amongst all Success Coordinators that these students needed to obtain some form of a high school degree. They were very conscious of the disadvantage their students would find themselves in if they did not at minimum have a high school education. They all acknowledge that in today's society one needs at least a high school degree to be competitive. This finding, the importance of a high school education, is consistent with a report from Bauman and Graf (2003) noting "…high school has gone from being the mark of the educated minority of the population to the minimum education level for 4 out of 5 adults" (p.2).

Intervention Efforts

Success Coordinator responsibilities can be classified into two categories: 1) preventive and 2) reactionary, with most responsibilities falling within the reactionary category. Findings showed a consistency amongst preventive measures throughout the four high schools; however, one school in particular expanded their preventive measures to incorporate the surrounding feeder middle schools.

> I am also responsible for] student awareness, we set up student panels and we go down to the middle schools and talk about the kids from [the high school], talk about their successes and the things they wish they had done, and things they wish someone had told them, and the ways they found to be successful in high school.

Additionally, this Success Coordinator had an established relationship with the local middle school counselors. Through these relationships, students for which "student awareness" efforts were not sufficient were identified early and given an opportunity to engage in a mentor program at the commencement of high school.

> I run a mentor program for freshman and sophomores, and 8th grade counselors identify them as kids who have responded to interventions in the past. And they feel are high risk for drop out…

The transition to high school, primarily the transition from eighth grade to ninth grade has been identified as a critical year for students at risk of dropping out (Orfield, 2004). Through these

early intervention efforts this Success Coordinator has established a line of communication between middle school and high school where students benefit from early identification and assistance in advance to becoming "at-risk" or ultimately dropping out. Intervention efforts and policies that smooth the transition to high school have been shown to alleviate the initial shock of this transition and have helped students "at-risk" of dropping out remain in school (Orfield, 2004).

Though preventive responsibilities were unique to one particular school, reactionary efforts were consistent throughout all high schools, with the "drop in" population, students who have re-engaged into the high school after dropping out, receiving unique attention. In identifying students for reactionary efforts, Success Coordinators identified two specific reports that assisted in identifying "at-risk" students: the 'red, yellow, and green light report' and the 'F report'. The 'F report' identifies students "at risk" of failing currently enrolled courses and becoming credit deficient.

> I also run F reports which list the current grade. So if there's a kid who's a green student but failing every single class, they come on to our attention so that they don't shift into all of a sudden they're way off track, but nobody noticed to try to bring them back.

Students identified by the 'F report' are referred to the extended day program, an after school program with an objective to provide tutoring and assist students in recovering deficient credits. All Success Coordinators expressed having some form of extended day program, ranging from an after school-tutoring club to one-on-one tutorials with teachers or success coordinators. One Success Coordinator in particular explained her role in running the program:

> We have an extended day program here that I help run, and that is looking at kids who have 69% or lower. And there's tutorial after school and then an activity bus that will take kids to whatever bus stop they normally get dropped off at. So making sure that those kids are identified, and that they're given the opportunity.

> It's not a force thing, but they have the opportunity to stay after school if they want to get help in those areas.

Additionally, with the 'red, yellow, and green report', which monitors students credit attainment, they are able to identify moderate "at-risk" students who are off track for on-time graduation (yellow) and high "at-risk" students (red) who are off track to graduate altogether.

> We have the credit recovery summer school that we do at [Esperanza] Public School District, and part of my job is to, as I'm tracking kids [who've] failed, what would they benefit from taking the credit recovery summer school… I work specifically with the students who we call red, which are off track, or yellow, which are the right on the line students. But I monitor all the students' credits, and then implement meeting times, and some type of intervention for the yellow and red students.

Furthermore, Success Coordinators also run a credit recovery program for seniors who are off track from on-time graduation due to being slightly credit deficient. This program, "Senior Slam", takes place throughout the school year:

> …senior slam, which is only about seven to nine days because we've had so many snow days the last couple of years. But that's like it's like a slam-dunk. They come in-- we sign them up only if they need to make up a couple of classes because seven to nine days is not a lot of time. And they have to be close to 50%.

Through this reactionary program seniors are given a last ditch opportunity to graduate with their graduating class. If this program is insufficient Success Coordinators attempt to enroll them into the summer school credit recovery program. Additionally, new efforts are currently being planned within one particular high school. As previously mentioned, there is one Success Coordinator who is currently tasked with redefining her position and in addition, creating new intervention methods, "we just created a credit retrieval class for math. We're working on, [omitted] social studies. We're working on that." Their ultimate goal is see these students graduate.

Turning Dropouts into Drop Ins

A special task assigned to all Success Coordinators is the tracking and the re-engagement of students who have dropped out. Their goal is to have students drop back into school and graduate.

> I do the CDU [Credit, Dropout, and Unknown] reports for the drop-outs to try to get them back, to try to find out where they went and that kind of thing… that's like follow-up calls, calling the parents, emailing, that kind of stuff, even if they don't want to come back here and necessarily, trying to get them engaged to go somewhere else.

Due to the special characteristics of the drop in population, Success Coordinators have unique reactionary measures for those who do decide to re-engage. Efforts include one-on-one mentoring, tutoring, and individual planning sessions in addition to all reactionary measures explained earlier.

It is evident from these findings that these Success Coordinators are held responsible for various tasks ranging in importance; however, one thing is unclear, is one Success Coordinator sufficient in accomplishing all these responsibilities?

The "At-Risk" Population

Defining the "at-risk" student population was difficult for most Success Coordinators. Throughout the interviews Success Coordinators acknowledged there were apparent trends amongst the students labeled "at-risk." However, one generalizable definition was inadequate as students do not need to exhibit all characteristics to be "at-risk," students can display simply one characteristic to be "at-risk." There was an apparent gender trend found in all four participating high schools. Success Coordinators reported a small but significant difference between male and females students, with males being more likely "at-risk:"

> I've had more male students that are behind. And even if they were kind of sort of even between the females and males, females seems to be more interested in getting where they want to go, and that's walking across the stage on time.

One Success Coordinator further explained that many of the “at-risk” Latino and Russian males within her school were so because of lack of attendance. She explained, "… they start working, either working with family members, under the table, whatever they're doing, because they're trying to help support the families.” Many of these males become “at-risk” simply because of the needs of their families, not necessarily because they are bad students or lack academic ability. This finding mirrors the national trend as U.S. Department of Education reports find that male students are more likely to dropout and about 33.5% have reported leaving school due to finding a job (Dalton et al., 2009).

When inquiring on racial trends, only one Success Coordinator directly spoke directly upon the trend within her school; all others refrained from answering, did not recall the statistics, or framed their answers in socioeconomic terms. The Success Coordinator who spoke upon the racial trends at her school stated:

> ...the majority of kids I'm working with that are credit deficient, that's just because of the population is probably Caucasian. I would then say Hispanic or Latino, African American. And that's just because of the balance. And Russian.

Though this Success Coordinator justified the order amongst racial and ethnic trends to student “balance,” her responses echoed the national trends with Hispanic/Latinos having higher dropout rates than African-American/Blacks (Aud et al.,, 2011).

Though this reporting shows a clearly diverse cultural population, it fails to paint an accurate picture of the identity of students in relationship to their demographic proportion. However, there was a consistent trend amongst racially diverse students. Many Success Coordinators reported that amongst these groups there was a large portion of students who are constantly moving from one school to another. These students are often referred to as “kids in transition.”

> I just feel like they're going from school to school to school, and it's mid-semester, not even mid-semester. So if they're only here for a few weeks, we can't really give them a grade. And then they go to another school and kind of pick up there."

The increased mobility of this population puts these students at risk as they fall behind in meeting distinct school and district requirements. The Success Coordinator's concerns are consistent with past research studies, which indicate that changing schools is detrimental to student achievement. In a study seeking to examine the relationship between mobility and high school completion, Haveman and Wolfe (1994) found that mobility reduced the likelihood of high school completion. In an examination of the National Educational Longitudinal Survey third follow up data, students with high mobility rates between grades 8th and 12th were more likely to have dropped out or enrolled in alternative educational programs (Rumberger and Larson, 1998). Additionally, this study found that as the rate of mobility increased the drop out rate increased. Overall, the study found that students with mobility during these years were more likely to drop out of school than students who only attended one school.

Though most Success Coordinators had difficulties defining the "at-risk" population, they were able to identify specific signals that they believed assisted in identifying students as "at-risk." There was a consensus on three signals: family instability, drug and alcohol use and attendance issues. Success Coordinators identified family instability, especially concerning finances, as an increasing trend due to the current national economic climate. Drugs and alcohol were connected to academic failure because "if kids become drug and alcohol involved. I mean they're not engaged, their brain isn't-- it's chemically altered, and they're not interested." However, the most pressing warning signal identified by all Success Coordinators was attendance.

> Attendance is huge. And culturally I know we've worked with certain cultures where school is not, academics is not what it is in our society

As the number of school days missed increased, Success Coordinators conveyed that assisting these students in "catching-up" became even a greater task. Attendance has been widely identified as an early dropout indicator and in an analysis of twenty-five years of relevant dropout literature, "thirteen of the nineteen analyses found that high absenteeism predicted dropping out" (Rumberger, 2011, p. 169; Rumberger & Lim, 2008). Success Coordinators voiced frustration with their inability to get students to simply attend class.

Success Coordinators identified a new trend, a significant increase in English Language Learners and an overall diversification of the population.

> ...probably the biggest increase I think in the last couple years at least would probably be students coming in from Vietnam. And they're not necessarily coming straight over from Vietnam. They're coming from another state, but they still need ELL services.

As the ELL population diversifies, Success Coordinators express a lack of resources available, specifically related to communication. Schools lack translators and adults with cultural understanding for this new growing population, thus bringing about new and unique challenges. The Success Coordinators did note that not all ELL students are "at-risk" of dropping out or far from graduating:

> ELL students, ... Credit-wise most of them do really well, and they try hard. They really want to succeed. The assessment testing is their biggest challenge most of the time, unless they start dropping because of needing to work and take care of family…the majority of the ELL students that I work with, not all, on transcript paper, they're not off trajectory to graduate.

ELL students continue to struggle to meet accountability standards. Esperanza School District's ELL students echoed the long existing national ELL trends. Historically, ELL resources have

been scarce making passing high stakes accountability testing a greater challenge for a population that is greatly under-served (Gándara & Contreras, 2009).

"Every single kid is different" individualistic intervention efforts

> I think the one thing that we, as a country, we need to see that every child gets the education that they deserve, and we need to see every child graduate from high school...every child can graduate from high school given the right support. And it's all individual. Every child's situation is different. So you have to meet them where they are, not where you necessarily want them to be.

Recognizing that "every single kid is different" was a fundamental component in the Success Coordinator's ability to assist "at-risk" students. Listening to each student and assessing each student's individual needs was key in determining the most effective intervention effort for a student. Success Coordinators expressed that each student has their own unique characteristics, that there was not one solution that fit the needs of all "at-risk" students. Success Coordinators expressed a need to acknowledge that each student is dealing with their own set of individual, familial and academic challenges. Many intervention strategies tend to address either the individualistic or institutional factors, but those intervention strategies most effective, are those that have a comprehensive model, tackling both individualistic and institutional factors (Rumberger, 2004). As such, Success Coordinators recognized that they must have a conversation with these students, and truly listen, listen "to find what-- really what can I do to help them, and that's totally an individual-- each kid needs a different thing or whatever the case is." Once communication has been established, Success Coordinators attempted to create a team mentality, where each student has an input in planning the next step. Giving students ownership was conducive to successful engagement.

Success Coordinators emphasized that understanding that "every single kid is different" was key when dealing with the drop in population. Preventing drop ins from becoming repeat

drop outs was dependent on understanding the particular needs of the individual student; understanding why they had initially dropped out and attempting to prevent those issues from reoccurring:

> A key thing is when kids come back is making sure someone's checking in with them so you can identify what are their problem areas so that someone's aware of those so we can find appropriate resources for them. So that if they had a trigger that was something to cause them to feel like yuck, I'm done, that we can avoid that happening again.

Moreover, Success Coordinators agreed that the number one component in retaining students was letting them know that there was someone who cared, someone who was going to help them succeed and not give up on them.

> I'd say the key components to keeping them once they come back is that they, again, they have to be supported whole-heartedly by everybody….But it's making sure that they believe that you really, really, really do care about them, and it's not just-- you know-- coming out of your mouth. Your actions speak louder than your words.

Success Coordinators express a feeling of responsibility to provide these students with the support and belief that they are capable of graduating, especially since so many lack the support at home. Success Coordinators also stated feeling responsible for creating a school culture where administrators, teachers and staff also provided this form of support. This push for a comprehensive support culture emulates the findings in a study by Croninger & Lee (2001), where they found that "positive relationships between students and teachers reduced the risk of dropping out, especially among high-risk students" (as cited by Rumberger in Orfield, 2004, p.143).

Challenges

Success Coordinators identified various challenges in their attempts to assist the "at-risk" and drop in populations. All Success Coordinators agreed upon three pressing challenges: (1)

student attitudes, (2) lack of parental involvement, and (3) English Language Learners and accountability testing.

Student attitudes

One of the most challenging obstacles Success Coordinators said they face in assisting the "at risk" population is the students' mindset. Success Coordinators expressed that many "at risk" students had negative attitudes towards their ability to either catch up or successfully graduate. "[L]ike kids will tell you I've never done good in school, and their mindset is I'm a bad student." Success Coordinators attempt to influence these mindsets by providing the extra support they need to succeed; however, they face a challenge with students because "once kids get behind in credits, it could be one credit, it could be three credits. And they hit that wall and they say well, I'm never going to catch up."

Additionally, Success Coordinators noted that many of these students lacked familial support and/or were experiencing difficult life situations; in turn, education was placed on the back burner as more pressing issues took priority for these students. A Success Coordinator shared that a student had expressed that "things at home [were] really bad, and so school's really not a priority...[students expressed having] bigger things to worry about it, like where [they were] going to live? How [were they] going to get my food?" In some situations, students became disengaged and unmotivated not knowing if they would be at the same school for long. A Success Coordinator explained:

> I'm working on students who are like I don't know if I'm going to be here after winter break, and the semester ends late January. So I'm trying to get students to kick it up a notch, get them in gear before it's too late. And they're hopeless because they're just like I'm not even going to be here in January.

Students disengage for many reasons and Success Coordinators acknowledge the need to provide social support and resources for many of these students as they attempt to keep them engaged in the academic environment.

Drop ins exhibit unique attitudes and mindset challenges. Success Coordinators express the need to understand the original mindset of these students and the reason they dropped out to begin with. In doing so, Success Coordinators could begin to tackle one phase of the problem. Tackling the second phase, the mindset upon return, was the most challenging aspect in assisting the drop in population. A Success Coordinator expressed that "...when they come back then they can't deal with it. Because now they're 19 or 20 and they might have to take a class that's a freshman class. It's embarrassing for them. A lot of it's just plain embarrassing." The embarrassment and shame is a constant discouragement for this group of students and is a challenge Success Coordinators attempt to overcome.

Lack of Parental Involvement

Efforts are made by Success Coordinators to engage parents in a student's progress. When students are initially flagged "at-risk," Success Coordinators attempt to establish communication with the student's parents; however, much of the time no communication is established. A Success Coordinator shared that:

> Like there's kids that I've worked with for four years and I have never spoken to their parents, and it's not a lack of effort. It's just I cannot get them to call me back or email me or I've never met them at the school.

Success Coordinators expressed additional parental involvement issues when attempting to contact parents of students who have dropped out or are re-engaging into school. Many of these students are over the age of eighteen (18) and parents place the burden solely on their child.

> … I call home to these students who have dropped out or withdrawn or whatever it is. I call home. But usually these students that I'm working with are over 18 and

> so I'm typically working with them. Parents are like just call my son or call my daughter.

Success Coordinators worried about how this attitude affected the success of the drop in population. This is a valid worry as multiple studies have shown that students whose parents have high academic expectations of them, who are actively engaged in their academic progress, and who are engaged in their schools play a substantial role in a student dropping out or graduating (Astone & McLanahan, 1991). This particular group, out of all, would greatly benefit from parental interest and involvement as they face additional challenges in attempting to complete their high school degree.

Success Coordinators articulated a unique challenge in involving parents of English Language Learners.

> What I've been noticing lately is when I call home, mom and dad or guardians don't speak English. And so I'm trying to communicate with them to let them know that the student needs to come after school in order to get credit retrieval, or in order to get support for their class. They're being given this opportunity. So I can talk to the student all I want, but we don't have that backing from home. There are some times I'm able to talk to an older sibling. Sometimes I have to translate through a younger sibling. And I don't really know-- well yeah, that's a trend as I'm seeing a lot of students who are ELL slipping through cracks.

The language barrier between Success Coordinators, who all spoke solely English, made contacting and engaging ELL parents difficult. The language barrier was faulted by Success Coordinators as the reason for the lack of parental involvement by ELL parents, a common misperception of ELL parents due to their inability to speak the English language (Gándara & Contreras, 2009; Contreras, 2011). However, Success Coordinators acknowledged that ELL parents expected their child to translate if there was no other mean of translation. Though interpreters are made available, often times, timely accessibility became the key issue. All Success Coordinators spoke of having to rely on the bilingual student or sibling due to lack of

interpreters; "...a lot of times the child can interpret for me." Moreover, Success Coordinators voiced concern over the rapidly diversifying ELL population, "…it's not like it's just one language that we need translation in. As I'm seeing these students, I mean languages I've never even heard of. I've been noticing Russian…." As the population continues to diversify access to translation services is becoming a crucial component in serving the "at risk" population.

Accountability Testing

Success Coordinators voiced concern over the increase in accountability testing. Washington State currently requires students to pass the High School proficiency Exam (HSPE) along with end of course examinations. These high stakes tests must be passed as a satisfying condition for a high school diploma. Success Coordinators expressed their concerns over these tests:

> I worry about it being a graduation requirement...But in all honesty, there's some kids [WHISPERING] that can't pass these tests. They could have 20 million credits on their transcript, and for whatever reason, some kids choke on tests. Some kids just don't do well. And what do you do?

Success Coordinators expressed feelings of frustration with these requirements especially when students are on track to graduate and the only requirement preventing them from attaining a high school degree is the HSPE. Success Coordinators acknowledged that students "who normally are in that boat are ELL students [because] their language is not at the 10th grade level, but they have done everything else as far as passing classes and so forth." This finding is constant for ELL students across Washington State as a review of WASL (assessment preceding HSPE) math scores from 1998 to 2008 show ELL students fairing much lower than the state average throughout the same time period (Contreras et al., 2008). These students work hard to meet all requirements and a single test stands in between them and a degree.

Success Coordinators continue to work with students unable to pass the HPSE. A Success Coordinator recalled her current experience working with students unable to pass the HPSE:

> Students that I'm working with right now that I'm trying to track down, like today actually, there's two of them. They were seniors. They dropped out earlier this year because all they needed was to pass the HSPE, the High School Proficiency Exam. Well they already took it, they didn't pass it. There's something called the COE which they can do, a Collection of Evidence. And they failed that. So what are they supposed to do now because that's like their last ditch effort….So these students had all their credits. They had everything done that they needed except for that HSPE. And what I'm trying to do now is try and get them to take the GED.

The ultimate goal for the Success Coordinators is to have these students graduate with a degree, whether it be a high school diploma or GED.

Data Use

All Success Coordinators acknowledged that data was a key component in assisting their efforts. Though their responsibilities relied heavily upon data usage, Success Coordinators themselves do not actively access data. A Success Coordinator expressed that "the district is kind of doing it from the district level and feeding it to us at the school level." However, all Success Coordinators had knowledge of the district data program and acknowledged that "[the] reports, everything that I get is coming from—[our district system], we have a new system this year, the eSchool Plus." When Success Coordinators were asked what type of information was stored in the district system, their answers were limited to the information found on the weekly reports provided to them.

When Success Coordinators were asked about their access and usage of data from the states longitudinal data system, CEDARS, there was confusion regarding the difference between the states and district data system. Upon clarification of what the CEDARS system is, and explaining what the CEDARS system was, a common response was: "I don't have access to

CEDARS. I get that information from the district...And I probably should actually, but maybe that's a question I'll have to ask somebody." Additionally, one Success Coordinator acknowledged receiving CEDARS information from the school registrars: “I get that information once it goes through [the registrar]. So she uses it [CEDARS] and then I find out from her. So I don't use it directly."

Relevant Professional Training

There was a consensus amongst Success Coordinators regarding the need for professional development, but particularly relevant professional development to their goals as Success Coordinators.

> I really would like to see not just myself educated more, but as a whole, educators, administrators. Because some people they only see the bottom line. And to me it's like you have to be sensitive to what's going on. You have to understand.

Success Coordinators are required a minimum of ten training hours; however, it is up to each individual Success Coordinator to find relevant training. Many times, selection of training is dependent on the resources available.

> [H]onestly, it depends on you either have to pay for them yourselves, or you have to really-- sometimes there's money available, but not always. So it kind of depends on can you find free, appropriate things as well if it comes to that.

Due to financial restraints, training hours are generally met by attending basic district trainings, which may or may not necessarily be relevant to their responsibilities. Success Coordinators are therefore left seeking no cost professional training opportunities or otherwise having out of pocket job-training expenses.

Recommendations

Overall, the findings present a cohesive picture of the role Success Coordinators have in attempting to decrease the high school dropout rate and transition students from dropouts to drop

ins. There is one core recommendation, streamlining the function and responsibilities of Success Coordinators in order to more efficiently serve the "at-risk" population. Two additional recommendations include providing comprehensive and distinct data system trainings for the schools' data system, eSchools, and the states longitudinal data system, CEDARS. Likewise, Success Coordinators would benefit from dropout and drop in specific professional training.

The ideal solution to the overwhelming demands placed on Success Coordinators would be to expand and create multiple Success Coordinator positions that would deal with specific grade levels. However, recognizing the economic constraints placed upon Esperanza School District, the second best and most efficient option is to streamline the Success Coordinators' functions and responsibilities. Doing this would allow them to better serve the "at-risk" and drop in populations. Currently, Success Coordinators are spread thin with responsibilities ranging from early intervention efforts, tracking of drop out students, tutoring, assisting registrars, to providing wide range academic counseling. Success Coordinators expressed their willingness to help and assist in whatever is necessary to advance the needs of their particular school; however, this willingness and the reliance placed on them hinder and take time away from a student population in which every minute without attention increases their chances of dropping out.

An additional component to streamlining Success Coordinators' roles is creating a comprehensive position, where all high school Success Coordinators for On-Time Graduation share similar responsibilities at their particular institutions while still tailoring the position to the needs of their high school. Success Coordinators noted, "I'm the Graduation Success Coordinator, and it's different from school to school." This lack of consistency amongst high school Success Coordinators further convolutes the main mission of this position. Sharing a

common mission and core responsibilities would facilitate the sharing of successful practices, enhancing the over-all effectiveness of all Success Coordinators.

Secondly, Success Coordinators need to be trained on and made aware of the various data available. In interviewing the Success Coordinators only one knew the difference between the school district's data system, eSchools, and the state's longitudinal data system, CEDARS. The lack of understanding was generally due to the district created dependency and expectancy of report outputs from the district. Though Success Coordinators felt the district leadership was providing sufficient information with the "red, yellow, and green light" reports and "F reports," when told of the possibility of information available through both systems but more specifically CEDARS, many showed interest in having access to the information; voicing that additional student information could potentially assist in accomplishing their objectives.

Lastly, Success Coordinators would greatly benefit from relevant professional training. Though Success Coordinators are required ten (10) hours of professional development training, many of the times these trainings are not directly relevant to pressing issues they face. Success Coordinators expressed wanting training in which techniques and tactics on dealing with student attitudes, engaging parents, and dealing with accountability were included. Though some Success Coordinators expressed finding relevant trainings, and a lack of a financial means prevented them from being able to attend. In these cases, Success Coordinators are left deciding not to attend or paying for the trainings out of pocket. Finding a source and mean to allocate funding or sponsorships for these additional trainings would assist Success Coordinators in dealing with the pressing challenges they face.

Conclusion

Data is a crucial component in Esperanza School District's effort to decrease their high school dropout rates. Through data usage, Success Coordinators are able to identify students "at-risk" of dropping out. Identifying trends and challenges specific to their school demographics, Success Coordinators are better equipped to assist those at risk of dropping out and those students who have dropped back into school. Success Coordinators are well versed on the data reports they receive; however, the lack of knowledge and understanding of the states longitudinal data system demonstrates potential for further data exploration and use.

As Success Coordinators continue to assist "at risk" students and reengage those who have dropped out, it remains extremely important for them to participate in professional development and trainings to further assist their efforts. Additionally, a larger effort amongst school leaders must be made to decrease the multitude of responsibilities held by Success Coordinators. Narrowing responsibilities to specific intervention practices will allow for Success Coordinators to focus on their overarching goal without the potential of burning out due to their over extension. As the district continues to turn to Success Coordinators in combating the dropout problem, it is important that Success Coordinators are fully supported, trained and able to fully utilize the existing data systems to identify and prevent students from dropping out.

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