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The Impact of the Swingshift Options School Alternative Educational Pathway on at-risk Middle School Students' Transition to High school

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THE IMPACT OF THE SWINGSHIFT OPTIONS SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE

EDUCATIONAL PATHWAY ON AT-RISK MIDDLE SCHOOL

STUDENTS' TRANSITION TO HIGH SCHOOL

by

CAROL RUTAN SMITH

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the
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DISSERTATION APPROVAL

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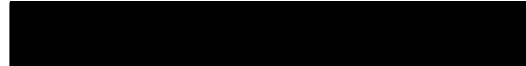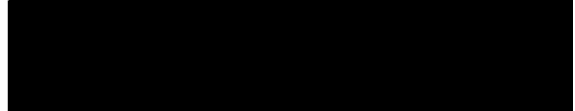
ABSTRACT

An abstract of the dissertation of Carol Rutan Smith for the Doctor of Education

in Educational Leadership: Curriculum and Instruction presented June 14, 2007.

Title: The Impact of the Swingshift Options School Alternative Educational

Pathway on At-Risk Middle School Students' Transition to High School

The purpose of this qualitative and quantitative study was to understand the

perspectives of so-called at-risk middle school students who participated in an

alternative mid-level program and the support that program might have provided in

their transition into high school. The study gives voice to such students and sheds

light on the type of programs and practices that reduce their risk for dropping out of

school. Dynarski and Gleason (2002) reported that early adolescence is a period of

both enormous opportunity and enormous risk for dropping out of school.

Participants were former students in the Swingshift Options School (SOS)

program at Five Oaks Middle School in Beaverton, Oregon. Several methods of

inquiry were used: interviews, surveys, and archival records. Together, these

methods provided layers of meaning and were used to address the central question

of the research: How did participation in the Five Oaks Swingshift Options School impact selected at-risk students' transition to and success in high school?

This study looked at the history of middle schools and the research surrounding developmentally responsive middle schools. Additionally, the study situates the development of alternative programs relative to a critique of the concept of "at-riskness."

The findings indicate that the students in this study experienced difficulty in transitioning to high school, and the transition from middle to high school needs to be seamless for students at-risk for dropping out of school.

The relationship with their teachers, counselors, and peers was very important to SOS students, and they valued smaller classes that helped them form positive relationships with their teachers. Flexible scheduling that allowed for access to service learning opportunities was also identified as a positive for the students while they were in middle school.

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CHAPTER I

RATIONALE AND PURPOSE OF STUDY

The look of distress on the faces of the police officers who came into our school that late June afternoon forecast the sad message they were to deliver. When they asked if they could speak with me privately, I felt my apprehension mount. They proceeded to tell me that a middle school boy had been hit and killed by a light rail train near our school. They believed he was probably a student of ours. My heart began to race as I thought about the horrible tragedy that was about to crash down upon one of our families and also our school family with the loss of this child.

The boy carried no identification, and it was difficult to describe his physical appearance in detail due to the severity of his injuries. The police wanted to know if I had any ideas who it might have been based upon their sketchy description. My two assistant principals and I began to put pieces of information together to help make an identification. The accident had happened prior to the end of the school day, so the student in question had to have been missing from school that day or at least had to have been missing from the final class of the school day. We narrowed our focus to three possible students. Each time we mentioned a name that could be the child, dread filled our hearts, and we mourned each possibility in a deep and penetrating way. As I retell this story, I am still filled with sorrow.

Through phone calls we were able to verify the safety and whereabouts of two of the possible students and that left only Chris. Following this lead, the police were able to verify that, indeed, Chris' life had come to an unexpected and tragic end. He was a student who in many ways was older and more worldly than we might expect of a middle schooler. He was "skipping" school the day of the accident which was one reason his name immediately surfaced. He was also a child for whom we had concerns. Somehow, Chris' needs were not being met at our school.

Anyone who works in schools for very long will have their life touched by students like Chris and experiences such as this. Chris and other children like him are one reason educators continue to search for new and better ways to meet the needs of our youth, especially those at-risk for dropping out of school. "Although many young people reach late adolescence healthy and ready for the challenges of high school and adult life, early adolescence for many others is the beginning of a downward spiral" (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 8).

Experiences with students like Chris prompted me, when I was a school principal, to work with my staff and parents to develop additional pathways for the young adolescent students to engage with school. We sought to create programs at the middle school which would help our students at-risk of dropout to make a successful transition to their high school years and beyond. Perhaps if Chris had

been enrolled in an alternative school program or pathway that more suited his needs, he might have been in school that day rather than "skipping."

Problem to be Studied

High dropout rates are a silent epidemic afflicting our nation's schools (Bridgeland, Dilulio, & Morison, 2006). A series of negative school experiences prior to ninth grade (i.e., poor grades, attendance problems) often precede a student's decision to dropout (Ascher, 1987), and Wells (1989) stated that middle school is the critical link to dropout prevention.

Caught between elementary and high school, middle school students are in limbo between childhood and young adulthood: They are out of balance and out of place. "Between the approximate ages of 10 and 14, human beings undergo more profound developmental changes than during any other period of their school lives" (Stevenson, 2002, p. 8). Often peers, not parents, are the predominant influence in their lives at the very time these early adolescents are becoming increasingly exposed to the influences of drugs, alcohol, and pop culture (National Middle School Association, 1995). While even younger elementary school students are exposed to many of these same influences, middle school students have increased independence from direct parental supervision and expanded social opportunities which make their exposure more frequent and critical in terms of impact (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002).

Early adolescence is a fascinating time of life filled with rapid physical, intellectual, and social change.

> It is the time when young people experience puberty, when growth and development is more rapid than during any other developmental stage except that of infancy. Dramatic physical changes are accompanied by the capacity to have sexual relations and to reproduce. (Jackson & Davis, 2000, p. 6).

It is a time, too, of heightened vulnerability to emotional hurt and uncertainty, and a time when these children in the middle are discovering their own identities (Jackson & Davis, 2000). Clearly, early adolescence is a period of both enormous opportunity and enormous risk.

The physical maturity of young adolescents also varies tremendously which adds to the students' self perception. Some look older than their years and with this more mature appearance comes social pressure to live up to that appearance. "Children whose physical changes occur unusually early or late often contend with circumstances notably different from those of their more average peers" (Stevenson, 2002, p. 93). Looking older at an early age, for example, might put sexual pressures on students before they are emotionally mature enough to understand the situation.

Piaget and Inhelder's (1958) early research on adolescent thinking demonstrated that adolescence is also the age when children begin to take on adult roles and responsibilities. They contended that this transition is based more upon social variables than upon neurological or physical variables in children. Stevenson

(2002) built on this idea as he summarized the bewildering and self-contradictory period of adolescence. When describing the world middle schoolers face, he said, "It is a world that seems to simultaneously expect both more and less of them than was the case in the past" (p. 114). Stevenson reminded educators that historically, children entered the work world at very young ages which forced them to face adult issues. He suggested that in the contemporary world, adults may have gone too far in protecting our young adolescents by giving them little or nothing to do that is worthwhile to them and/or to their community.

More immediately, middle school is also a time when students are preparing for their transition to high school. In his work on student transitions, Allen (2001) reported that anxiety over academics and social issues increases as students enter high school. Furthermore, feelings of inadequacy increase during this transition and are heightened by intense worries over social relationships and emerging sexual feelings.

In addition to these changes, there are heightened differences in the individual development of each child. Scales (1996) noted:

> The onset of puberty and the related changes in young adolescents' physical, socioemotional, and cognitive development produce at times dramatic differences in how these young people feel, think, and act. Any group of twelve-year-olds, for example, might include young people who are as young as nine or as old as fifteen in some aspects of their development.
>
> Any single twelve-year-old might feel, think, and act like a nine-year-old today, a twelve-year-old yesterday, and a fifteen-year-old tomorrow. (p. 15)

These widespread differences in young adolescents make it even more challenging and important to increase our understanding about the best ways to meet their needs. This situation is particularly true for students who experienced additional risk factors in their lives and who may need an alternative pathway through the challenging years of middle school (Costello, 1996; Donnelly, 1987; Wood, 2001). Specifically, several factors have been analyzed by researchers to determine the causes of low academic performance in students. According to Shannon and Bylsma (2002), these are often categorized into two areas: factors outside the influence of schools, such as family background, social and economic factors, personal qualities, and factors that can be influenced by the school system, such as school organization and size, classroom routines, instructional methods, teacher expectations.

My study focused on the voices of so-called at-risk middle school students who participated in an alternative middle school program called Swingshift Options School (SOS) and their perspectives on the support the SOS program may have provided them in their transition to high school. Cook-Sather (2002) stressed the value of including student voice in educational research.

> We educators and educational researchers must seriously question the assumption that we know more than the young people of today about how they learn or what they need to learn in preparation for the decades ahead. It is time that we count students among those with the authority to participate both in the critique and in the reform of education. (p. 3)

The voices and experiences of these students were sought through both interviews and surveys.

<div align="center">Background and Theoretical Framework</div>

Several factors contribute to middle school students being at-risk for dropping out of school, and these factors help frame the background for the importance of hearing the voices of at-risk middle school students. First, the changing demographics of schools have impacted the face of the school house (Juvonen, Le, Kaganoff, Augustine, & Constant, 2004). Second, the complexity of the lives of the students themselves has also increased in recent years; and third, the incidence of high school dropouts indicates the need for earlier intervention in the lives of at-risk middle school students (Dynarski & Gleason, 2002). This section will discuss each of these three areas. To begin, a theoretical framework of "at-riskness" needs to be presented.

Who are "At-Risk" Students?

Ayers and Ford (1996) stated, "In our society today, 'at-risk' functions as a kind of witch-hunting metaphor: void of any credible data, it is a label in search of content" (p. 5). These authors added that many of the students who are labeled as at-risk are really at-risk of being poor or black, and in all of their years of working in oppressed communities, they said they had never heard a person call himself or herself "at-risk." "It's simply not anyone's self-definition. This is a broad hint of what can destroy good intentions" (p. 6).

How have others defined the term at-risk? *The Greenwood Dictionary of Education* (Collins & O'Brien, 2003) defines at-risk as, "A term used to describe children who have, or could have, problems with their development that might affect their ability to learn" (p. 31). The definition continued:

> Children susceptible to the adverse effects of physical, genetic, physiological, environmental, or developmental conditions are said to be "at-risk." Furthermore, examples of environmental conditions that could place children at-risk include low income of families, lack of health care services, and caregiving that is neglectful or abusive. At-risk students are defined as those who show a greater risk for dropping out of an educational program before completion than a typical student. (p. 31)

Barth (2002) described at-risk students in a more conversational manner. He said at-risk students are those who leave school before or after graduation with little possibility of continuing learning. He had a concern that reached deeply into the love of learning that is missing for some students. These students are at-risk even though they may not experience many of the typical characteristics such as poverty.

Historically, at-risk students were identified as those whose appearance, language, culture, values, communities, and family structures did not match those of the dominant white culture that schools were designed to serve (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990). Much of the literature around "at-riskness" implies a deficit model which places the responsibility for academic failure on the student (Costello, 1996; Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990). More recently, there is a tendency to blame the school for the failure of students. Hixson and Tinzmann examined the complexity of the at-risk issue, and they described four approaches to defining at-risk students which they have identified in current literature. They stated each approach has limitations:

1. The Predictive Approach is based on a deficit model of students and their families and communities. For example, students who experience certain living conditions such as living with a single parent or being a member of a minority group could be described as at-risk because students in these groups are more likely to demonstrate low achievement levels. This early categorizing of students often has the effect of lowering teachers' expectations of what students can achieve. This approach also blames the students for factors over which they have no control.

2. The Descriptive Approach waits until school-related problems occur and then identifies students as at-risk. The difficulty with this approach is that the interventions that are often put in place to help these students do not impact the general school procedures and policies, so no preventative action is implemented.

3. The Unilateral Approach states that with the increased complexity of problems faced by today's youth, all students are at risk in one way or another. Hixson and Tinzmann (1990) stated that treating people equally does not mean that all should be treated the same.

4. The School Factors Approach identifies certain school characteristics that may hinder academic achievement of students such as inflexible schedules, narrow curricula, a priority of lower-order skills, limited instructional strategies, and tracking to name a few. The approach puts the sole responsibility for successfully educating the students on the school when there may be conditions in the student's life over which the school has no control. This approach also reduces the responsibility of students for their education and their parents' involvement with the school. (p. 3)

Beyond the four approaches presented above, Hixson and Tinzmann (1990) identified societal conditions and structures that influence student life. Some of these are touched on in the Predictive Approach (e.g., living conditions, single parent). Hixson and Tinzmann stated,

> As the demographics and economic stratification of society change, so, too, does the public's interest and willingness to support schools for 'other people's' children or for services for the increasing number of youth with various social, personal, emotional, or for that matter, health-related needs. (p. 7)

Students at-risk of dropping out are often seen as those "other children" mentioned

above, and garnering support for them may be difficult.

Perhaps there is some truth in each of these approaches. Hixson and

Tinzmann (1990), however, urged us to define "at-riskness" as a function of

inadequacies in one or more arenas (i.e., school practices, student

characteristics/circumstances, and the community context) that are not

compensated for in the others. My study aligns with this concept of mismatch

where the arena of the school can create an environment for "at-riskness" to grow

when mismatched with the arena of the student.

Changing Demographics of Schools

To better understand how this mismatch of arenas has developed, look at

one area of impact - changing demographics. Osorio-O'Dea and Apling (1999)

prepared a report for The Congressional Research Service on the demographics of

the United States school-age population. They reported the overall school-age

population increased from approximately 45 million in 1980 to about 52 million in

1997. So-called minority enrollment (e.g., racial and ethnic minorities) increased

substantially during this time. The proportion of white school children as a

percentage of the total school population decreased from about 75% in 1980 to

65% in 1997. While poverty rates have been relatively stable since 1980, poverty

rates among racial and ethnic minorities continue to be at least twice those of

whites. Additionally, children living in single female-headed households have a higher rate of poverty than children living in two-parent homes.

The Alliance for Excellent Education (2003) reported that demographic changes correlate to achievement. "At-risk students are disproportionately poor and minority, with a persistent achievement gap between minority and non-minority students" (p. 1). Other factors they claimed correlated to academic achievement include the education level of parents, mobility of students, poor attendance, and limited English proficiency, reported to represent 7.9% of school aged students in 2002.

Five Oaks Middle School in Beaverton, Oregon, faces many of the same challenges that schools across the country face in trying to meet the needs of students. Specifically, the demographics at Five Oaks Middle School changed dramatically over the years that the subjects in this study attended there. Students on free/reduced-price lunch that represent poverty rates increased steadily, from 16% in 1997-1998 to 48% during the 2003-2004 school year. The percentage of minority students was 13% during the 1994-1995 school year. The minority student population increased to 45% during the 2003-2004 school year with over 30 languages represented by the students and their families (see Table 1 for additional minority student detail). Many of Five Oaks' minority students were enrolled in English Language Learner courses, and some of these students faced additional

challenges related to cultural differences between themselves and the dominant culture of the school and its teachers.

Table 1

2003-2004 Five Oaks Middle School Minority Student Demographics

Ethnicity	Number of Students	Percentage
Caucasian	596	54.5
Hispanic	249	22.7
Asian/Pacific Island	168	15.3
Black	6	5.7
Indian/Alaska	13	1.1
Unspecified	4	.3

Five Oaks also showed a sharp increase in the number of enrollment changes (i.e., number of students transfers in and out during the school year). Enrollment changes grew from 15% in 1998-1999 to 30% in 2003-2004. An example of what this looks like in the schoolhouse may be seen by examining the 2000-2001 enrollment statistics. Two hundred fifty-eight students withdrew and 264 new students enrolled at Five Oaks that year which meant that 25% of the student body had changed. A constant flow of enrollment changes within a school population means that teachers are constantly adjusting their teaching as they evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of these new students, and the culture of the classrooms changes with new members added and subtracted. None of these factors taken in isolation is dramatic, but when combined they definitely signal a student

population that may be at progressively higher risk. So, for what are these students at-risk?

Dropout Rates Indicate Need for Early Intervention

Dropout rates continue to be a concern for educators. Donnelly (1987) reported that nationally more than 25% of potential high school graduates drop out before graduation. The majority of these young people are identified as at-risk students whom she describes as low academic achievers with low self-esteem. Males and minorities dominate her statistics, and at-risk students often come from low income families with low educational backgrounds. Wood (2001) also reminded us that among the risk factors facing students, poverty is the strongest predictor of dropping out.

The transition from middle to high school is a precarious time for the potential dropout. Oregon dropout statistics from 2001-2002 showed that 15.4% of Oregon's dropouts are between the ages of 13 and 15 years of age which represents an unsuccessful transition to high school (Oregon Department of Education, 2001a). Scales (1996) wrote, "Increasingly, educators recognize that the transitions out of elementary school into middle school, and from middle to high school, are two of young adolescents' most vulnerable periods" (p. 7). SOS students had many risk factors which made them even more vulnerable than most students at these times. If alternative pathways are not explored and evaluated, students like the SOS students are potential school dropouts.

Dropout Rates in Oregon High Schools: 2000-2001 State Summary Report
(Oregon Department of Education, 2001a) stated the high school dropout rate in
Oregon had declined for the third consecutive year. This publication attributed this
improvement to (a) increased attention being given students with attendance and
academic problems and (b) schools doing a more thorough job of tracking the
history of withdrawn students to find out where they went. This dropout rate
improvement was encouraging news, but the reasons students leave school still
need to be addressed. For the purpose of this study, it is important to note that 5.6%
of the 8,713 dropouts were students ages 13 and 14 (p. 5). These statistics support
the need for middle school intervention for students who are at-risk of dropping
out.

The Oregon Department of Education (2001a) reported the most frequent
school problems which students cited for influencing their dropping out include:

- too far behind to catch up
- frequent discipline referrals
- could not adjust to school setting -- did not "fit in"
- did not get along with one or more staff members
- lack of appropriate alternative education opportunities
- student felt unsafe at school (p. 15)

These reasons represent the powerful voice of the students who have dropped out
of school. The significance of student voices was recognized in the Oregon
Department of Education study of dropouts, and the voices of the Swingshift
Options School students are significant in this study as well.

Kauffman, Alt, and Chapman (2001) stated that five out of every 100 students enrolled in high school in October 1999 left school before October 2000. Furthermore, about three fourths (78.8%) of these dropouts were youths ages 15 to 18. Forty-two percent of these students were ages 15 to 17. These statistics show the need for innovative programs to support successful transitions for students from middle school into high school. The risk factors for the students served by the Five Oaks Swingshift Options School (SOS) program include socioeconomic, race, and mobility challenges as well as a history of academic failure. These factors make the SOS students prime candidates for dropping out of school based upon the Alliance for Excellent Education's (2003) research.

Who is a dropout? The Common Core of Data provided by the National Center for Education Statistics (2001) defined a dropout as an individual who

- was enrolled in school at some time during the previous school year

- was not enrolled at the beginning of the current school year

- has not graduated from high school or completed a state or district approved educational program (includes GED program).

The Oregon Department of Education (2001a) defined a dropout as a student who withdrew from school and did not graduate or transfer to another school that leads to graduation. Dropouts do not include students who:

- are being home schooled.
- are enrolled in an alternative school or hospital education program.
- are enrolled in a juvenile detention facility.

- are temporarily absent because of suspension, a family emergency, or severe health problems that prevent attendance at school.
- received a GED certificate.
- received an adult high school diploma from a community college, or
- received a modified diploma.
- are deceased (p. 3)

The Oregon Department of Education stated, "The research points to the need for dropout prevention to become less a matter of changing students, and more a matter of changing opportunities for students to succeed" (p. 2).

Wood (2001), in his work on reducing the dropout rate, suggested some ways in which schools could create more opportunities for student success which support the ODE viewpoint. He believed that the size and location of the school or program play a role in dropout prevention. When looking at many large high schools, Wood found that creating schools-within-schools has been found to be effective in countering high dropout rates. Small program size and a low student/teacher ratio are particularly helpful. Alternative schools designed to serve at-risk populations of students have been successful, as has the practice of locating dropout prevention programs outside of schools in nontraditional settings in the community. Wood further suggested that research supports the practice of identifying potential dropouts as early as possible and providing intensive intervention to insure early success. Wood's suggestion implied the importance of middle school and elementary programs for youth at-risk of dropping out and the importance of understanding their special needs.

Student Needs

The complexity of the lives of 10 to 14 year olds and how those complexities impact their school performance have sparked much interest and research by the educational community. The affective needs of the students at-risk of dropping out are important and often overlooked. As Sizer (1999) stated, "We cannot teach students well if we do not know them well" (p. 7). Cohen (1999) built on the concept of looking at the whole child when he said,

> We need to pay attention to all facets of the child; this includes an attempt to discover where each child's particular strengths and weaknesses lie, what the child's interests are, and which helpful (or unhelpful) coping strategies he or she has developed. (p. 9)

Looking at the whole child as Cohen suggested might offer insight into some of the affective needs of the students. For example, students need to feel connected to their teachers and to feel that teachers are fair and care about them. Such relationships do not solve the problems students present, but Cohen believed they do make a profound difference in student success in school.

Palmer (1998) also stressed the importance of relationships not only between students and teachers, but also between students and the subject matter being taught. He said, "Good teachers possess a capacity for connectedness. They are able to weave a complex web of connections among themselves, their subjects, and their students so that students can learn to weave a world for themselves" (p. 11). Alternative programs offer the opportunity to develop these relationships and connections for students and enhance their chances for academic success.

Donnelly (1987) described several components of effective alternative programs which lead to student success. She said that successful programs often place at-risk students in separate learning environments with low student-to-teacher ratios and provide counseling and support services. The alternative programs she described also emphasized flexibility, individualized curriculum, and innovation, all of which help address the developmental needs of students.

Other at-risk indicators that add to the challenges a student faces were considered of additional interest to this study. Attention problems, multiple retentions in grade, lack of connection with the school, lack of confidence, and limited goals for the future were some additional considerations (Robertson, 1997). As was mentioned earlier, cultural diversity presents another example of a mismatch between the school community and the agency of some of its students when the community is not diverse.

Stevenson (2002) said that the additional challenges of coping and survival that middle schoolers face are often enormous, and educators must not underestimate the jeopardy for students. Educational researchers (e.g., Juvonen et al., 2004; Stevenson, 2002) have long tried to address the challenges and needs of students in the middle. For example, the Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development (1989) produced a report, *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century*. One of its eight essential principles stressed that middle schools should be partners with various kinds of community organizations in

educating young adolescents, including involving them in the experience of

carefully considered service learning. This involvement in service learning might

be a way to add rigor and responsibility to the lives of young adolescents that was a

need referenced earlier in Stevenson's work.

The transition from middle school to high school is difficult for all students,

but this transition can be even more difficult for students who are identified as

academically at-risk. Ascher (1987) stated,

> The ninth grade, difficult for most students, is particularly hard for students
> who are at risk. Students in the ninth grade are at an uncomfortable stage of
> adolescence: they face less scheduling and rule flexibility; and are tempted
> to indulge in the antisocial behavior of some of the upper-class members at
> the high school where they are the youngest students. Further, they are in
> search of ways to demonstrate maturity in spite of their class position. (p. 1)

Ascher (1987) added that students most likely to drop out of school during

their ninth grade year are those with previous at-risk indicators such as attendance,

discipline, and academic problems. The students invited to participate in the

Swingshift Options School represented these indicators. SOS was born in April

1999, to help address the needs for a limited number of students at-risk of dropping

out of school. After summarizing definitions relevant to the problem and this

inquiry, I provide further context for this study.

Definitions

To summarize the challenges students face while in middle school and

during their transition to high school, it is helpful to clarify some of the

terminology that surrounds these topics.

At-risk students: At-risk students are those who have a higher potential to drop out of school than other students (Collins & O'Brien, 2003). This definition is not intended to imply that there is a deficit in the student, but rather that there is a mismatch between the requirements and expectations in one arena and the ability of other arenas to respond to them (Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990). The arenas include the school, the community context, and the circumstances of the students.

Alternative education: Alternative or optional educational programs provide an educational plan that varies from the standard curricular and structural arrangements. "Alternative education offers nontraditional yet effective learning environments that provide flexible educational delivery systems closely related to the learning styles and the individual needs of the students" (New Jersey State Department of Education, 2004, p. 6).

Middle school: Middle schools most commonly begin with the 6th grade and end with the 8th grade. Some students in the middle grades are served in schools configured in other ways, for example, grades 5 through 7, grades 7 through 8, or in schools configured to serve students grades K through 8 (e.g., Juvonen et al., 2004). Middle schools differ from the junior high school model which most commonly is configured grades 7 through 9 and functions organizationally using a high school model. The National Middle School Association (2003) in *This We Believe*, outlined characteristics of developmentally responsive middle level schools, initiating a national effort to

move middle schools from the high school model to one embracing the developmental needs of middle level students.

Risk factors: Risk factors that influence the lives of students include poverty, race, ethnicity, mobility, language, or other perceived inadequacies in areas of their lives.

Successful student: A successful student is one who is still in school actively pursuing his/her education into the high school years.

Engagement in school: A student who demonstrates engagement in school is one who has an attachment for school as exhibited by regular attendance and involvement with school activities or people (i.e., teachers, counselors, peers).

Purpose of the Study

One size does not fit all. Alternative learning programs need to be developed in order to provide academic settings for struggling middle school students which will help them improve their academic performance in high school and achieve an improved self image of social acceptance. The purpose of this study is to understand the perspectives of so-called at-risk middle school students who participated in an alternative mid-level program and the support that program may have provided in their transition into high school. This study not only gives voice to such students, but also sheds light on the type of programs and practices that supported their success. As the complexity of our student community grows,

alternative pathways must be developed for middle school students at-risk for dropping out to increase their opportunity to succeed in school.

This study makes a unique contribution to the research about students at-risk of dropping out in that it allowed students to express their "rearview mirror" perspective about their experiences through middle school and through their transition into their high school years. Since the student participants were older and had gained some measure of experience and maturity, they were able to talk about and respond to questions about their school life with thoughtful insight. The information the students provided is informative to educators who are trying to address the problem of school dropouts. The voices heard are students who were identified in middle school as being at-risk of dropping out. Most of them have forged their way through high school. Their selective perspective is limited but allows the issues most salient to their experiences to rise to the top. It is important to listen to the students who have recently completed the transition from middle school to high school if educators are to more accurately understand the challenges of this transition and learn ways to improve and prepare this pathway for students.

Context for Study: Swingshift Options School

Swingshift Options School was a self-contained classroom at Five Oaks Middle School in Beaverton, Oregon. It began in April 1999, after approximately six months of planning with Site Council members and a planning team of administrators, counselors, and teachers. Five Oaks is a 6th through 8th grade

configured middle school. The purpose of the SOS program was to provide an alternative path for selected 7th and 8th grade at-risk for dropping out who had experienced limited success in the regular classroom setting. These students were selected to participate in an alternative educational setting which emphasized student voices and choices in a classroom which had a 15 to 1 student-to-teacher ratio. Students had a voice in identifying areas of interest for study, and they had choices about the focus of their study. Their curriculum, however, was still aligned with the Oregon Department of Education standards and Certificate of Initial Mastery requirements.

The importance of building relationships was stressed in the development of the program by the Site Council and planning group. Class size was restricted so that students and the teacher could more easily build relationships with one another. SOS was a place to emphasize the heart in learning and teaching. The key components of the program were also designed to support the objective of a relationship enriched program, and those components, which are described later, include:

- Student-centered curriculum

- Community involvement

- Academic focus

- Mentoring

- Narrative assessment

- Student/Teacher/Parent Contracts

- Transportation

- Schedule

Students were selected into the SOS program based on a high At-Risk Score. Susanne Whitt, Research & Evaluation Specialist for the Beaverton School District at the time the SOS program was initiated, was enlisted to help identify the students who seemed to be most at-risk. An At-Risk Score was established for students based upon the following factors:

- Number of absences

- Number of out-of-school suspensions or expulsions

- Participation in free/reduced lunch program

- Membership in ethnic group

- Number of F's through the most recent quarter of school year.

The At-Risk Score was computed based upon the following formula: At-Risk Score = # of F's times 5 + # of days absent times 3 + Free/Reduced lunch (2 if on reduced; 4 if free) + ethnic category (1 if minority). The weighting of these variables was decided by Susanne Whitt based upon her knowledge and experience in research and student evaluation. The factors included in computing the At-Risk Score were influenced by the work of earlier researchers (i.e., Ayers & Ford, 1996; Collins & O'Brien, 2003; Hixson & Tinzmann, 1990).

Donnelly's (1987) description of at-risk student characteristics supported

the general importance of the at-risk factors used in the formula for selecting

students for the SOS program:

> At-risk students are students who are not experiencing success in school and
> are potential dropouts. They are usually low academic achievers who
> exhibit low self-esteem. Disproportionate numbers of them are males and
> minorities. Generally they are from low socioeconomic status families.
> Students who are both low income and minority status are at higher risk;
> their parents may have low educational backgrounds and may not have high
> educational expectations for their children. (p. 1)

Through a student-centered curriculum, students were given the opportunity

to develop their own individual areas to research. For example, students could

develop a special project based upon an area of study that included cross-curricular

elements. One project example the teacher described to students with a serious

interest in art included researching two favorite artists, reading their biographies,

writing a comparison study of those artists, and giving a multimedia presentation to

the class on that topic. For an artist like Escher, mathematics could easily be

integrated into that student's course of study as well. Naturally, the historical

setting of the time the artists were productive would be important, too.

Academically, the students were urged to focus on topics relevant to their

lives. Organizational and study skills were stressed as students set both short-term

and long-term goals for their projects. Collection of Evidence work samples for the

Certificate of Initial Mastery was also an academic focus.

Community involvement was a critical element of SOS program. The students participated in a variety of service learning opportunities throughout the Portland metropolitan area. One year, clusters of students worked in one of the following settings: tutoring students at a neighboring elementary school, assisting Forest Park employees by improving environmental conditions in the park, helping at the St. Francis Kitchen by serving food, and working with Habitat for Humanity. These projects encouraged the students to learn about themselves and their community.

Palmer (1998) considered the value of service learning when describing a college political science class at a state university. Three fourths of the students were given the normal syllabus while the remainder were assigned the normal syllabus plus a field placement. One might think that the latter students would suffer academically because they had to spend extra time and energy on field assignments and may have even resented that fact. However, Palmer reported that those field placement students did *better* academically and became more personally and substantively engaged with the course, because being involved with the community made their book work more real.

Brown (2003) argued that workplace learning connected students to their communities by contextualizing their school experiences. Those experiences represent a constructivist approach to teaching and learning where teachers provide

guidance to students as the students construct their own knowledge while engaging in active learning experiences.

The spirit of the SOS classroom community was also supported through team building activities. The SOS students partnered with Independent Skills Center students who had significant developmental issues and physical challenges. They students also assisted at the local Special Olympics events. These are just a few of the service learning experiences provided for students. Service learning activities bridge community involvement with the curricular activities of the classroom.

One area that was not initially fully developed was our effort to establish adult mentors for each student in the SOS program to provide a one-on-one relationship. We failed in our efforts to engage more community volunteers due to the shortage of time and personnel to address that outreach. There were, however, many adults who did interact with the students. We identified several reliable volunteers who assisted the program including one School Board member, one Site Council member, and an AmeriCorps volunteer. These additional adults assisted the classroom teacher and the instructional assistant who were assigned to the program. Other professionals who were connected with the SOS program included a school psychologist or counselor and a special education teacher. The psychologist or counselor met regularly with the students as a group and/or individually to provide additional emotional support for these students. Remember,

the students selected for the SOS program had a history of school failure. Their confidence and affective feelings about school suffered, so it was felt that extra support by the counseling staff would be beneficial. The special education teacher assured that any students on Individual Education Plans (IEP) had their needs met.

Student assessment was a necessary consideration. Narrative assessments were used for the SOS students. Letter grades were not given. The teacher worked with students to help them write about their accomplishments and the challenges they faced. The students then used their assessments as a basis to inform their goals. Teacher comments about these goals were included on a weekly report which went home for parents. Parental comments were also encouraged so that the narrative was really a three-way conversation among student, teacher, and parents. These conversations about students' goals were also formalized through written contracts between parents, students, and the teacher for long-term goals. Goal-setting was taught and students were coached closely as they reviewed and evaluated their progress. Since these students had little past experience at success in school, this close and timely evaluation and goal-setting allowed for quick monitoring and adjusting.

The schedule of the SOS program also reflected the unique needs of adolescents with regard to their sleep patterns. Many SOS students had attendance problems prior to being selected for participation. It was hoped that the later arrival time would help improve their attendance. Carskadon (1999) researched adolescent

sleep needs and found that the need for sleep does not change across adolescent development. What does change, however, is a series of behavioral factors. "Fewer children in their early teens reported that parents still set their bedtimes, and most said that they required an alarm clock or a parent to assist them in waking" (p. 349). When given a choice, most teens elect to go to bed later than when their parents set those times. Other factors which reduce the amount of sleep early adolescents get include school schedule, increased social demands, and availability of media in the bedroom (i.e., computers, televisions, telephones). So for a variety of reasons, early teens are not getting the amount of sleep they need to perform well at school. The planning team chose to recognize that need and to set the schedule for our Swingshift Options School to reflect that need as well as other needs.

The school day for SOS students began at 11:00 am and ended at 4:45 pm. This schedule for the Swingshift Options School dictated the need to provide transportation for students. Busing was provided for students who required it. Additionally, transportation was provided for the service learning activities that the students attended weekly. In order to develop the sense of identity of SOS as a separate school-within-a-school, a separate "traffic pattern" for coming and going to school was established for SOS students. This schedule also reduced the social pressures that students may have felt by their inclusion in the SOS program, and it reduced the opportunity for negative social interaction with the larger student population. The later start time for the SOS students inspired its name: Swingshift

Options School. We also chose the name because its abbreviation (i.e., SOS) reminded us that these are students who need help -- students who need teachers with courage, knowledge, and heart to help them reach their goals.

The Swingshift Options School changed its name in 2003 to the Options School although the subjects in this study attended prior to this change. Some small changes were also made in the schedule due to financial constraints of the busing expense. The majority of the organizational and philosophy for this alternative pathway, however, was maintained. The Beaverton School Superintendent voiced support of this study and formal application for the project was submitted and approved by the Beaverton School District.

Ascher (1987) helped summarize the importance of this study when she said,

> Students most likely to dropout before completing the ninth grade are those who have had attendance, discipline, and academic problems in the past, possibly from the beginning of their school careers. Some are simply waiting until their 16th birthday so they can legitimately leave. Even students who move on to the tenth grade and beyond are more likely to dropout before graduation if they had an unsuccessful ninth grade year. (p. 1)

Middle school alternative pathways need to be developed to help students at-risk prepare and negotiate the transition into high school at that time in their lives when anxiety over academics and social issues increase (Allen, 2001).

CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

This study was designed to investigate midlevel students' experiences in an

alternative educational pathway (Swingshift Options School) from their

perspectives and in their voices. It also explored how that experience influenced

their academic and social experiences during their transition to high school.

Therefore, the research is set in the context of the developmental needs of early

adolescents and related qualities of middle schools. It also examined alternative

educational pathways for middle school students.

My review of the literature on developmental qualities of middle schools is

organized into two primary categories: (a) who are middle school students, and (b)

historical and current practices in middle schools. The literature on alternative

pathways for at-risk middle school students is also organized into two primary

categories: (a) availability of alternative educational pathways, and (b) descriptions

of selected alternative educational pathways. I also examined current practices

aimed at helping middle school students make the transition into high school.

Developmental Qualities of Middle Schools

Who are Middle School Students?

Middle school students are entering adolescence, a unique developmental

time according to Solodow (1999). He stated, "Nowhere else in the entire course of

individual history is there a more dramatic meeting between biology and mind" (p. 24).

The Oregon Department of Education (2001b) defined middle schools as schools that group students between the ages of 10 and 14. One of the most common middle school arrangements groups children from sixth to eighth grades. In describing middle school students, the Oregon Department of Education described their uniqueness: "Young people at this age show a good number of contradictions and conflicts which is normal. There is no 'model' adolescent" (p. 23). The work of the Oregon Department of Education was greatly influenced by earlier research into young adolescence conducted by the National Middle School Association in its 1995 version of *This We Believe.*

Emotionally, youngsters of middle school age are on a hormonal ride where moods swing so quickly it is sometimes impossible for teachers or parents to anticipate the swells and dips. Just as academics start to get even more complex, school is the last thing on the minds of many of these students (Portner, 2000). The National Middle School Association (2003) emphasizes that early adolescence is a period of tremendous variability. The authors emphasized some of the developmental characteristics of young adolescents which have been mentioned earlier. For example, dissimilar rates of growth are common in many areas of a child's development, including intellectual, physical, social, emotional, and moral growth. Additionally, family structure and societal forces such as poverty, racism,

sexism, violence, crime, substance abuse, and child abuse confront adolescents today.

All is not negative, however. The current surge in brain research has provided more knowledge about the cognitive abilities of young adolescents and the potential they represent. After decades of conflicting thoughts about the intellectual capacity of young adolescents, scholars see a growing consensus that middle school students' brains are ready for learning (Jacobsen, 2000). The National Institute of Mental Health (2001) conducted an overview of research into brain development during adolescence which verified that structural changes in the brain continue well into the teenage years which influence its readiness for learning. Between the ages of 6 and 13, the areas connecting brain regions specialized for language and understanding spacial relationships experience a growth spurt. "This growth drops off sharply after age 12, coinciding with the end of a critical period for learning languages" (p. 2).

Jensen (1998) stated that structural changes in the brain continue throughout the teen years. He said, "The single best way to grow a better brain is through challenging problem solving. This creates new dendritic connections that allow us to make even more connections" (p. 35). He highlighted the fact that both the right and left hemispheres of the brain are fully developed and ready for complex abstractions by ages 11 to 13, making this a prime time for increasing brain

function. Clearly early adolescence is a time filled with unique opportunity in a

child's cognitive development.

In 2003, the National Middle School Association reported common

characteristics of middle schoolers that help educators understand them. They

categorized these developmental characteristics into physical, cognitive-

intellectual, moral, psychological, and social-emotional areas. These developmental

characteristics are lengthy and detailed. They are summarized below and help set

the stage for this study.

In the area of physical development.

Young adolescents experience rapid and irregular physical growth and
hormonal changes that vary with gender and ethnicity. These physical
changes manifest themselves often with an increased need for physical
activity, restlessness, or fatigue.

These adolescents are increasingly concerned with bodily changes and
sexual awareness increases as secondary sex characteristics develop. They
are also physically vulnerable because they may adopt poor health habits or
engage in experimentation with alcohol and other drugs and high-risk
sexual behaviors (p. 44)

In the area of cognitive-intellectual development.

Young adolescents display a wide range of individual intellectual
development and are able to think abstractly and concretely. They are
developing a capacity to understand higher levels of humor, some of which
may be misunderstood by adults to be overly sarcastic or even aggressive.
They are intensely curious and prefer active over passive learning although
this can vary culturally. Interactions with peers during learning activities is
preferred, and they respond positively to opportunities to connect what they
are learning to participation in real life situations, such as community
service projects. (p. 45)

In the area of moral development.

Young adolescents are in transition from moral reasoning that focuses on "what's in it for me" to that which considers the feelings and rights of others. They are increasingly capable of assessing moral matters in shades of grey as opposed to viewing them in black and white terms. Generally, they are idealistic and often show compassion for others although at times are quick to see flaws in others but slow to acknowledge their own faults. Finally, they are idealistic, desiring to make the world a better place and to make a meaningful contribution to a cause or issue larger than themselves. (p. 46)

In the area of psychological development.

Young adolescents are often preoccupied with self. They believe that personal problems, feelings, and experiences are unique to themselves, and they tend to be self-conscious and highly sensitive to personal criticism, and they want recognition for their positive efforts and achievements. These young adolescents seek to become independent, but they continue to need support and boundary-setting from adults. They are curious about sex, and have sexual feelings, and they are psychologically vulnerable, because at no other stage in development are they more likely to encounter and be aware of so many differences between themselves and others. Fortunately, they are also psychologically resilient. (p. 48)

In the area of social-emotional development.

Young adolescents have a strong need for approval and may be easily discouraged, and they have a strong need to belong to a group, with approval of peers becoming as important as adult approval, and on some matters even more important. In their search for group membership, they often overreact to ridicule, embarrassment, and rejection. Often they experience sexual harassment, bullying, and physical confrontations more than they did in elementary school or will in high school. Finally, they are socially vulnerable, because, as they develop their beliefs, attitudes, and values, the emphasis media place on such things as money, fame, power, and beauty may negatively influence their ideals and values, or encourage them to compromise their beliefs. (p. 49)

These common developmental characteristics would be echoed by most

middle school teachers and parents of young adolescents. Certainly the fragility of

moods and the high energy levels demonstrated by middle schoolers are qualities

widely recognized. Everhart (1983) conducted a field study of student life over a 2

year period in a California junior high school. These central challenges were

equally present in his study then as they are now.

The increased diversity of cultures represented by students today has added

the newest challenge to efforts to better understand middle schoolers. Delpit (1995)

stated, "One of the most difficult tasks we face as human beings is communicating

meaning across our individual differences, a task confounded immeasurably when

we attempt to communicate across social lines, racial lines, cultural lines, or lines

of unequal power" (p. 66). During my years as a middle school principal, I

witnessed the conflict that some students experienced when the cultural values of

their family's traditions and customs varied from the patterns of their peers and

what schools as cultural institutions value. During one parent/student conference,

an interpreter was engaged to help communicate the seriousness of the behavioral

issue that involved the student. The mother of this child told me through her tears

that at this time of life when her son needed her wisdom, she could not speak

English well enough to talk about important issues with him, and he could not

speak his own native language well enough to communicate thoroughly with her. In

this case the conflict of the cultural lines within a family became the issue.

History and Current Practices in Middle Schools

Nationally, middle schools most commonly serve students in grades 6 through 8, but some students are served in other ways such as fifth grade through seventh grade or seventh grade through ninth grade (Juvonen et al., 2004). The Oregon Department of Education (2001a) defines middle schools as schools that group students between the ages of 10 and 14.

The uniqueness of the middle years in education began to be recognized during the junior high school movement, 1910-1925. The transition to the middle school structure in the 1960s was a continued effort to define goals for early adolescence as the grade configuration shifted to a grade 6-8 or grade 5-8 structure (National Middle School Association, 1995).

Anfara and Waks (2000) reported that middle schools were created in the 1960s as a replacement for junior high schools in a search to improve the schooling of such children in the middle -- that is, between elementary and high schools.

> In short, the junior high was tarred with the brush of an overemphasis on teacher-centered, academic, and disciplinary approaches. A greater emphasis on students' developmental needs was prescribed. (p. 47)

Junior high schools had become mini-high schools. In response to the problems of this approach, Anfara and Waks described a middle school structure where the psychological, physical, and cognitive needs of young adolescents would be a greater focus.

Beginning in 1980, the National Middle School Association (NMSA) initiated a study to clarify the direction of education for early adolescents. The NMSA publication of a series of position papers called *This We Believe* (NMSA, 1982, 1995, 2003) and other national research efforts such as *Turning Points: Preparing American Youth for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1989), and *Turning Points 2000* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) influenced much of the educational community across the nation. *Turning Points* (Jackson & Davis, 2000) offered eight essential recommendations for improving middle grades' education based on the developmental needs of the age group:

- Large middle grades schools are divided into smaller communities for learning so each student will receive sustained individual attention.

- Middle grades schools teach a core of common, substantial knowledge to all students in ways that foster curiosity, problem solving, and critical thinking.

- Middle grades schools should be organized to ensure success for virtually all students by utilizing cooperative learning and other techniques suitable for this developmental phase.

- Teachers and principals, not distant administrative or political organizations, should have the major responsibility and authority to transform middle grade schools.

- Teachers for the middle grades should be specifically prepared to teach young adolescents and be recognized distinctively for this accomplishment.

- Schools should be environments for healthy promotion, with particular emphasis on the life sciences and their applications; the education and health of young adolescents must be inextricably linked.

- Families are allied with school staff in the spirit of mutual respect with ample opportunities for joint effort.

- Schools should be partners with various kinds of community organizations in educating young adolescents, including involving them in the experience of carefully considered service learning. (p. x)

The impact of these initiatives has been felt across the nation. For example, in Oregon, teacher licensure requirements have been specifically developed for a middle school authorization. Most states have a professional middle-level organization which is affiliated with the National Middle School Association (Stevenson, 2002). Finally, my review of the presentations scheduled for the 2002 National Middle School Association Conference showed that the concepts of smaller learning communities, site-based decision making, and the other tenets of *Turning Points* were heavily embraced. Such emphases are exemplified by several representative topics including: *Turning Points* in Action, Creating a Culture of Thinking and Engagement, Instruction that Involves the Community, and Teaching in Flexible Blocks of Time (National Middle School Conference, 2002).

There has been some academic subject-centered reaction to the heavy focus on developmentally appropriate practices which *Turning Points* emphasized. Anfara and Waks (2000) believe the pendulum is swinging back again to emphasize core academic content in light of the complaints that developmentally oriented middle schools lack rigor. They stated, "The problem is clear: Blaming the academic failures of middle level education on developmental features of middle schools may be pointing to a cause that does not even exist" (p. 49). They based their statement upon John Dewey's early beliefs that knowledge should be

organized around the lives of children, unified by their personal and social

interests, rather than those of adults. For the more mature student, subject matter

knowledge can be organized into a more discipline-based approach. Younger

students, however, must begin with knowledge as something connected through

objects and activities in their world. "The child lives in a somewhat narrow world

of personal contacts. Things hardly come within his experience unless they touch,

intimately and obviously, his own well-being, or that of his family and friends"

(Dewey, 1902, p. 5). Dewey further described the importance of a child's

experiences as building blocks for rigorous learning when he stated,

> Nothing can be developed from nothing; nothing but the crude can be
> developed out of the crude -- and this is what surely happens when we
> throw the child back upon his achieved self in a finality, and invite him to
> spin new truths of nature or of conduct out of that. It is certainly as futile to
> expect a child to evolve a universe out of his own mere mind as it is for a
> philosopher to attempt that task. Development does not mean just getting
> something out of the mind. It is a development of experience and into
> experience that is really wanted. And this is impossible save as just that
> educative medium is provided which will enable the powers and interests
> that have been selected as valuable to function. (p. 18)

In 1995, the National Middle School Association published another position

paper entitled, *This We Believe: Developmentally Responsive Middle Level*

Schools. A summary of the rationale of this position paper further reflects on the

uniqueness and needs of young adolescents:

> When coupled with an equally full understanding of the cultural context in
> which youth grow to maturity, educators have the essential foundation for
> making wise decisions about educational programs. The National Middle
> School Association, fully aware of the fact that the experiences youth
> undergo during these formative years have lifelong influence, has sought to

reconceptualize developmentally responsive middle level schools. Such schools will promote the growth of young adolescents as scholars, democratic citizens, and increasingly competent, self-sufficient young people who are optimistic about their future. (p. 10)

The beliefs of the National Middle School Association were presented in

two categories. In the development of the Swingshift Options School, these

beliefs and the eight essential principles from *Turning Points 2000* were

considered as guidelines (see Table 2).

Table 2

National Middle School Association Beliefs

Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools are Characterized by:
- Educators committed to young adolescents
- A shared vision
- High expectations for all
- An adult advocate for every student
- Family and community partnerships
- A positive school climate

Therefore, Developmentally Responsive Middle Level Schools Provide:
- Curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory
- Varied teaching and learning approaches
- Assessment and evaluation that promotes learning
- Flexible organizational structures
- Programs and policies that foster health, wellness, and safety
- Comprehensive guidance and support services

Source: National Middle School Association (1995, p. 11)

Alternative Educational Pathways for At-Risk Middle School Students

Current practices in middle school education are designed to address the

developmental needs of students in the middle, but what about those students who

bring to the schoolhouse challenges in their lives that are a mismatch even with these current practices? How can we best serve them? Are educators developing programs or alternative educational pathways for students that are flexible and better align with their special needs and help set them on a path to academic and social success?

Availability of Alternative Educational Pathways

Although there is a growing interest in developing alternative pathways for middle school students (e.g., Dynarski & Gleason, 2002), there is a limited amount of documented research on the follow-up with students who took these pathways. Searches of ERIC, U.S. Department of Education, National Middle School Association, National Association of Secondary School Principals, and other Internet sites produced limited information about programs for students at-risk for dropping out of school and in need of an alternative pathway in middle school. Examples of the keywords used for the searches include the following: At-risk, alternative education, educationally disadvantaged, high risk students, academic failure, compensatory education, developmental studies programs, magnet schools and nontraditional students. The few examples that demonstrate a national interest in forming alternative middle schools are focused on behavioral problems or magnet arts or other special interest schools as demonstrated in the U.S. Department of Education (2004) report, *Innovation in Education: Creating Successful Magnet Schools*. In this report, special interest or magnet schools have

as their most prominent themes: ecology, global issues, fine arts, or science and technology (p. 3). Additionally, charter schools are increasing in numbers, and they are becoming a different type of alternative school. Due to the selectivity of charter schools, they were not included in this study. Examples of two representative middle level alternative schools are discussed below.

In 1991, four middle school principals in Louisville, Kentucky, met to discuss their concerns about the increasing number of delinquent students in the middle grades, to keep those students from interfering with other students' learning, and to help them turn their lives around before high school. Kennedy Metropolitan School was formed to help meet this need. It is an example of an alternative school which focuses on middle school students with extreme behavioral problems. The 15 to 1 student to teacher ratio is a strength of Kennedy. Daily attendance of targeted students increased from 62-78% the first year. Of the 170 students they returned to their home schools during the 1996-1997 school year, only 32 returned to Kennedy due to repeated infractions (Holland, 1998). There was no report on the academic achievement of the Kennedy students.

Long Beach, California, provides another national example of a middle school alternative effort (Norton, 2000). Some of the academically neediest students in Long Beach attended Hamilton Middle School which had struggled to meet the needs of its students in part due to the rapid turnover of new and inexperienced teachers on its staff. The district supported a new approach to bring

about change. A team of knowledgeable veteran teacher/coaches were hired, one in each core curriculum area, to work with these new teachers to help them improve both student management and curriculum development. These teachers helped redesign instruction for the students who had limited basic skills and special learning needs (Norton, 2000). Again, no documentation was available about the academic gains of the students in this school or the impact of the alternative route they followed.

Dynarski and Gleason (2002) in their dropout prevention research examined four middle school programs which took an intensive approach to serving at-risk students. The Griffin-Spaulding Middle School Academy near Atlanta, Georgia, and the Accelerated Academics Academy in Flint, Michigan, were alternative middle schools with facilities that were located in a separate facility from the regular district schools. The Project COMET in Miami, Florida, and Project ACCEL in Newark, New Jersey, were located within the same facility of the regular schools, but separated participating students from other students for much of the day. These four programs taught their students in smaller classes than the normal class sizes, and they provided more counseling services. Many of the students in these alternative schools were also overage for their grade level. Dynarski and Gleason found that when compared with control group students, students in these four alternative schools were half as likely to dropout and completed an average of half a grade more of school.

Matthews and Swan (1999) conducted a seven-year longitudinal study which examined the effects of two linked at-risk programs: the TOPS (Tapping Our Potential Success) Program at the middle school level and Project Success at the high school level. Their study also sought to identify program elements that were perceived as beneficial by former students. Their study also included follow-up interviews with former TOPS students. Key elements of the middle school TOPS program were: (a) students received instruction in all subjects in a self-contained setting; (b) students were provided individualized instruction with emphasis on hands-on-learning, cooperative learning, and interdisciplinary units; (c) students served as tutors in a cross-age tutoring program for at-risk 4th and 5th graders; (d) students and parents participated in home visits throughout the school year; (e) students participated in activities designed to build self-esteem and were given the option of group counseling sessions.

Findings from this study suggested success for many of the former TOPS students. Attendance rates did not increase over time, but students maintained attendance commensurate with or better than those of the entire student body of the school. Passing rates improved during the time students were enrolled in the TOPS program. One interesting finding relates to the performance of TOPS students in high school. Students who experienced one year of regular education at the middle school level prior to enrollment in high school had greater academic success in high school. Matthews and Swan (1999) attributed this finding to the acquisition of

skills necessary for the transition and successful completion of course work in a classroom where extra supports are absent.

Of note, discipline referrals increased during the initial enrollment in TOPS for nearly all of the students. Matthews and Swan (1999) said this may be related to the fact that students enrolled in the program were identified as "problem" students and that their behavior was more closely scrutinized (p. 27). One additional concept emerged clearly. Students who were constantly referred for discipline problems fell behind, became disillusioned, and were more likely to dropout.

When former TOPS students were interviewed and asked how the TOPS program differed from the regular classroom, their answers were consistent. Three areas were identified: smaller class size, self-contained configuration of the class, and the hands-on, individualized instruction. Many students mentioned the caring and helpful teachers and a class being like a family.

The TOPS program was unique in that it provided a longitudinal look at student transition from middle to high school. Providing this smooth transition remains a challenge for school educators (Mizelle & Irvin, 2000). Students are often fearful of this transition and are worried about being prepared academically, fitting-in socially, and getting lost in the larger school environment (Mizelle, 1999). Mizelle and Irvin found that educators need to reemphasize articulation between middle and high school. Their research showed that most middle schools had fewer

articulation activities for their students going to high school than they conducted for students who were transitioning from elementary school to the middle school.

Smith (2007), when describing these articulation activities, said the activities tend to be held in isolated informal settings and focus on curriculum selection and tours of the schools. He said there is little evaluation data showing how transition activities influence students' perceptions of the social, academic, and organizational culture of the high school.

Farrell (1990) listened to the voices of at-risk high school students in his research on dropouts. He facilitated dialogues between at-risk students whom he referred to as his "collaborators" and their teachers and other students not traditionally described as at-risk. He found that many high school students respond favorably to the traditional academic program. "The others, up to 50% of the population, may need different programs and different places, but the similarities among high school students ... far outweigh the differences" (p. 3). SOS students share many similarities with other students, too, but they definitely fall with Farrell's 50% group who need something extra.

The availability of alternative educational pathways for middle school students in the Beaverton School District is limited, although it has grown in recent years. Opportunities that do exist often are provided primarily for students with disciplinary issues. Other alternative programs that are currently available are magnet programs which cater to students with special interests or talents such as

arts, math, science, or technology. At the time of this study, there were only two alternative programs in Beaverton for students who were not special education students: Swingshift Options School and Pathfinders Middle School.

The Pathfinders Middle School was the result of a partnership that was developed between the Beaverton School District and the Washington County Education Service District. This school provided an option for students who had behavior and disciplinary problems at their home schools. Enrollment was limited to two or three students from each of the district's eight middle schools. At the end of the 2001-2002 school year, the Beaverton School District decided to begin its own version of the Pathfinders Middle School. It was housed at Five Oaks Middle School at that time, but still served students from across the district. Detailed information about the Swingshift Options School program was presented in chapter 1.

Recently, several additional district-sponsored programs have been developed for middle school students with special interests. The Arts and Communications High School expanded its enrollment to include 8th grade students during the 2001-2002 school year and extended opportunities to sixth and seventh grade students as well by the 2003-2004 school year. These students must initiate application through presentation of a portfolio which demonstrates their motivation and ability to succeed in an arts-based curriculum.

In 2004-2005, the Beaverton School District developed three additional options programs for middle school students. The Rachel L. Carson School for Environmental Science is available by application to students with a high interest and ability in the sciences, math, and technology. Summa Academy provides differentiated, challenging curriculum that meets the intellectual needs of highly capable students in a developmentally sensitive way. Students must also apply for this school opportunity. To be eligible, students must score in the 99th percentile on a test of cognitive ability and/or in both reading and math achievement tests. The K-8 Elementary Programs at Raleigh Hills and Aloha Park Schools have been developed to provide an opportunity to create a systematic, continuous instructional program that is academically rigorous in a nurturing, small community environment, sixth through eighth grade students in the Raleigh Hills and Aloha Park attendance area have direct admission to these programs. Other fifth grade students across the district will have access to these programs only if there are available spaces through a lottery system (Beaverton School District, 2004).

It should be noted that special education students have access to some additional options dependent upon their Individual Education Plans. These alternatives are not, however, available to the general regular education student population.

Swingshift Options School

Five Oaks Middle School's Swingshift Options School (SOS) was the only other alternative program for middle school students in the Beaverton School District at the time of this study. Details about the SOS program were presented and discussed in chapter 1. Several features of the SOS program are supported by other researchers.

Beane (1990) stressed the importance of developing curriculum which honors the developmental stage of life and the social issues that young adolescents face. He stated, "I want to argue that the middle school ought to be a general education school and that its version of general education ought to be of the kind based upon personal and social concerns" (p. 55). Furthermore, Beane (2005) presented the concept of democratic teaching which involves collaboration between the teacher and students to develop themes which provide opportunities for young people to simultaneously think about themselves and the world around them while learning to use a variety of content and skills.

The community service component of SOS is another way of integrating the connection between the students' personal and social concerns with their curriculum. The students in SOS help decide which community service projects they pursued based upon their interests. They also integrated learning from these projects with their school curriculum when appropriate. Their work in Forest Park

ivy removal and reforestation, for example, was integrated into their science studies.

The Swingshift Options School is an example of how Five Oaks used an integrative approach and flexibility, such as that called for by the National Middle School Association (1995), to meet the needs of some of its students. Again, as a former principal, I am concerned that educators are not meeting the needs of all of our students. Perhaps we can do a much better job of presenting a curriculum that is challenging, integrative, and exploratory if teachers are given time to collaborate and grow their professional knowledge and have the incentive to do so. The teachers at Five Oaks met with both the nearby high schools and elementary schools to improve academic alignment as well as social transitions for their students. This was a good beginning, but much more can be done in this area.

Danielson (1996) recognized the link between teacher collaboration and student achievement. One of the expectations for learning and achievement she cited for the distinguished teacher is, "Both students and teacher establish and maintain through planning of learning activities, interactions, and the classroom environment high expectations for the learning of all students" (p. 82).

Danielson (1996) also stressed the importance of providing students with opportunities to learn from each other. As she discussed regarding effective management of instructional groups, "Groups working independently are

productively engaged at all times, with students assuming responsibility for productivity" (p. 84).

In middle and high schools, many classes are cross-graded which provides an age diversity. Additionally, the cultural, economic, and cultural diversity of students is an increasingly visible factor in our schools. This spectrum of students should be a natural resource which spins out dialogue and enriches debate. It is the professional growth of teachers, however, which is at the apex of improving student achievement; and collaboration among teachers is vital. Collaborative planning should include curriculum issues and also reflect knowledge of the diversity factors of the students. According to Everhart (1983), learning situations in junior high schools routinely emphasize student homogeneity so that the schooling system does not create more variety than it can handle. This creates the antithesis to an environment where diversity is celebrated as a tool for collaboration and learning.

Collaboration between teachers needs to expand beyond the sharing of ideas, however, to include peer coaching and systemic research. Danielson (1996) reminded us that "As teaching becomes increasingly grounded in research, the concept of teaching as a true profession, with all the implications of such a transformation, is becoming more evident" (p. 127). Teachers need to think systematically about their practice and learn from their experience and the experiences of colleagues.

The student voices I captured through interviews highlighted successful practices that impacted them when they were participants in the SOS program. Additionally, it was helpful to note which transition activities helped these at-risk students move into their selected high school program. For example, students in Mizelle's (1999) study reported that if their middle school teachers had held them more responsible for their learning by teaching them more learning strategies and by providing a more challenging curriculum, they would have been better prepared for their transition to high school.

The voices of the students in this study were important to me, and they offered information that will improve practices targeted to help other at-risk students and to explore the research question: How did participation in the Five Oaks Swingshift Options School (SOS) impact selected at-risk students' transition to and success in high school? Furthermore, the information gathered through this study helped delve even more deeply into the research question through exploration of the following sub-questions.

1. Why was the SOS program developed?

2. What impact did participation in SOS have on students' experiences in middle school?

3. How did former SOS students feel they were prepared for high school?

4. How are former SOS students actively engaged in and connected to high school?

5. What conditions need to be present for students to remain in high school?

The student voices represented in this study were unique in that they came from students who had experienced the SOS program and also had a variety of high school experiences. Their voices, therefore, represent a longitudinal view of the SOS program and how features of that program might be helpful to other students during middle school and during their transition into high school. Middle school is not the last chance educators have to help students at-risk of dropping out, but it may be our best chance, and educational leaders need to learn more about what practices and strategies have a positive impact on these students. What better way to learn this than to listen to the students.

CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY AND PROCEDURES

This chapter describes the research methodology and procedures that were

used in this study which sought to explore the overarching research question: How

did participation in the Five Oaks Swingshift Options School (SOS) impact

selected at-risk students' transition to and success in high school? The study

specifically focused on how participation in the SOS program impacted these

students both academically and socially as they made their transition to high

school.

The research approach used was primarily qualitative, using an instrumental

case study method designed to examine the fundamental assumption underlying the

development of the Swingshift Options School at Five Oaks Middle School that

alternative educational pathways must be developed for students who are not

achieving success in the mainstream classes. Stake (1995) described the

instrumental case study as a research method which uses a case study format to

help understand something other than only the particular case or related cases. It

must be emphasized that there was great interest in the case of each student who

participated in this study, but the objective was to examine and understand the

larger picture of how these students' participation in the SOS program impacted

their transition to high school and what could be learned to prevent dropping out of

school. Therefore, each individual student case study became instrumental in learning about the effects of his or her SOS experience and its influence.

The case study approach incorporated information from several methods of inquiry: a survey, interviews, and archival records. The purpose for using a variety of inquiry methods is to be able to answer different types of research questions and to triangulate the results. Different types of research questions call for different methods of data collection and analysis. The interview questions were designed to deepen the topics of the survey since the student voice was emphasized in this study. As was mentioned in chapter 1, Cook-Sather (2002) stressed the value of including student voice in educational research.

> We educators and educational researchers must seriously question the assumption that we know more than the young people of today about how they learn or what they need to learn in preparation for the decades ahead. It is time that we count students among those with the authority to participate both in the critique and in the reform of education.
> (p. 3)

Together, the three methods of inquiry used in this study had the potential to provide layers of meaning that were used to understand the experiences of SOS students while they were enrolled in the SOS program and to document the impact of those experiences on their transition to and experience in high school. In addition, by disaggregating the data (for example, into grade level), it was possible to understand the impact of the SOS experience from the perspectives of different groups of students. Through this study, insight was gained into the impact of an

alternative pathway through middle school by studying the experiences of selected students who participated in the SOS program at Five Oaks.

After a presentation of the context of the study, the second section of this chapter presents the research methods and the rationale. Participant recruitment and characteristics of these participants are discussed in the third section of the chapter. The fourth section explains the methods of data collection and analysis. The limitations of the study and its significance are presented in the fifth and sixth sections, and the concluding section is a summary of the chapter.

Context for Study: Swingshift Options School

Swingshift Options School was a self-contained classroom at Five Oaks Middle School in Beaverton, Oregon. The Beaverton School District is located just west of Portland, Oregon and is the third largest school district in Oregon with an estimated enrollment in 2007 of 37,157 students with 8,343 of those students in middle school.

The purpose of the SOS program was to provide an alternative pathway for selected seventh and eighth grade students at-risk for dropping out of school. A complete description of the SOS program and the student selection process for its students was presented in chapter 1.

In this study 12 former SOS students were surveyed (8 males and 4 females) and nine of those were interviewed. There was approximately a four year age span represented by the participants; one female student was of Native

American descent with all other students being Caucasian. The survey and interview process took place over nine months, with the final interview being completed on January 6, 2006.

The Beaverton School District Department of Information Services supported the data gathering, and the high schools within the district that the students attend or attended were supportive as well. The Beaverton Superintendent voiced support of the research project and formal application for the project was submitted and approved by the Beaverton School District. A copy of the letter of approval is in Appendix A.

<div align="center">Research Methods and Rationale</div>

This study is a landscape picture of the SOS students' transition to high school where the program forms the background and the students are the foreground. The study uses an instrumental case study method as a means to gain greater understanding of the issues that face the student participants who were at-risk for dropping out of school and to learn from the students how participation in SOS influenced their transition to and success in high school. Scales (1996) said issues are not simple and clean. Using an instrumental case study allowed the combined knowledge gained from each student to become a lens for investigating the issue of dropping out of school. It was important to hear from students about their learning experiences to help identify the features of middle and high schools that may help other at-risk students become more successful in high school.

Selected former SOS students were asked to tell their stories of transition from middle school to high school through both interviews and surveys. The surveys provided a quantitative or numeric description of these students' experiences (Creswell, 1994). In addition to the voices of the students, a review of the academic records of students who participated in SOS were also studied, although these records were limited to the final Grade Point Average (GPA) for each participant which provided some additional quantitative information.

Despite the recognition that at-risk students need additional support in middle school in order for them to make a more successful transition to high school, there is limited research on the effects of at-risk students' participation in alternative programs in middle school or their transition to and success in high school. This study provides information from the voices and lives of the students who were impacted by an alternative middle school program and their transition to high school. An additional reason for conducting this study is to provide the Beaverton School District with useful information about the strengths and weaknesses of SOS, which may inform future decisions about development of alternative educational pathways for middle school students.

The central question addressed is the following: How did participation in the Five Oaks Swingshift Options School impact selected at-risk students' transition to and success in high school? Additionally, several sub-questions frame

the research for this study. The sub-questions and the source(s) of data for

investigating the questions are found in Table 3.

Table 3

Research Sub-Questions and Sources of Data

	Research Sub-Questions	Source(s) of Data
1.	Why was the SOS program developed developed?	Archival Records
2.	What impact did participation in SOS have on students' experiences in middle school?	Archival Records, Survey, Interview
3.	How did former SOS students feel they were prepared for high school?	Survey, Interview
4.	How were former SOS students actively engaged in and connected to high school?	Survey, Interviews
5.	What conditions need to be present for students to remain in high school?	Interview

With the exception of the first sub-question, each of the questions was

developed to elicit information directly from the students who participated in the

SOS/Options program. The student voice was extremely important in this study,

because the SOS program was developed specifically for students who exhibited at-

risk behaviors associated with dropping out of school.

A search of the ERIC system, Dissertation Abstracts, and journals that

report studies of programs for at-risk students revealed very few research studies

that specifically used the voice of at-risk students to understand what school and

classroom practices are most important to students and that helped them during

middle school and as they prepared to go on to high school. Cook-Sather (2002)

asserted,

> The work of authorizing student perspectives is essential because of the
> various ways that it can improve current educational practice, re-informing
> existing conversations about educational reform, and point to the
> discussions and reform efforts yet to be undertaken. (p. 3)

In *Hanging In and Dropping Out: Voices of At-Risk High School Students*,

Farrell (1990) used the voices of at-risk high school students to explain why the

programmatic and organizational design of the typical American high school may

not be the most effective delivery system for at-risk students. That belief is as true

today as it was 18 years ago when he first began his study.

> The American high school has been able to help large numbers of
> adolescents, perhaps even the majority ...But for many it has been
> ineffective.
>
> Unable to find answers in their assigned place, they do not consider that
> place to have a great deal of meaning for their lives. Moreover, if remaining
> in that place adds to their anxieties, they are apt to leave. They become high
> school dropouts. (p. 1)

Farrell and his collaborators conducted three rounds of interviews with at-risk high

school students and recorded the classes many were in. Together, the responses of

students from the three rounds of interviews were systematically coded and

analyzed, resulting in a vivid story about what it is like to be an at-risk student in

high school.

Studies that purposely seek out the voice of at-risk students are too few in

number. The importance of learning what students have to say about their

experiences in the SOS program paired with their school record of performance

helps identify the practices that best help at-risk students during their middle school

years and in their transition into high school.

Participant Selection and Recruitment

The participant population included students who participated in the SOS

programs at Five Oaks Middle School in Beaverton, Oregon, from 1999-2003 for

whom I could find contact information. This group included 37 students. Student

and parent/guardian contact information was obtained through the Beaverton

School District and the current principal at Five Oaks Middle School. This group

included students who were participants in the initial SOS pilot program in their

final quarter of eighth grade and those who participated at any time in the first three

years of the program. I decided to limit recruitment to this audience of students due

to changes that were made in the program after I left as principal at Five Oaks.

In order to define the group of students to be surveyed and interviewed for

this study, certain characteristics were identified, and the label at-risk was chosen

as a descriptor because of its recognizable usage. It is important to note, however,

that the choice of this term was taken with the greatest respect for the warning that

Ayers and Ford (1996) issued. Honoring the students and the potential they hold

and researching ways to help them reach their potential is the ultimate goal of this

research study.

> We have to achieve a broad general understanding of the physical,
> intellectual, and psychosocial context of early adolescence as it is available

through pertinent theory and research about human development. That essential knowledge must then be augmented by our own firsthand studies of youngsters in accessible settings. (Stevenson, 2002, p. 32)

Informed consent procedures were met prior to initiating any active research. A copy of the permission forms can be found in Appendices B and C. Students were given appropriate Informed Consent forms either in person or through the mail.

All students who were surveyed met informed consent requirements. This included parental consent for students under the age of 18 years. Twelve surveys were completed and returned, and of those all who were willing and available ($N = 9$) were also interviewed. An effort was made to assure a mix of gender, grade level, and ethnicity. The gender and grade level mix was attained, but only one participant represented a minority group, and that was one Native American female.

The study required participants to invest time to complete the survey and time to participate in the interview. Privacy envelopes were provided for participants to return their surveys to the school counselor or to the researcher through the mail so that their confidentiality could be honored. Approval of this study by the Beaverton School District assured the cooperation of the school counselors. Surveys were identified only by number, school, and grade. Participation in the study was voluntary.

It was anticipated that no potential physical, social, psychological, legal, economic, or other risks existed for the participants. It was assumed that there could be, however, some initial discomfort in the interview process due to the fact that the participants were students at Five Oaks Middle School while I was the school's principal. Time was taken to explain to the students that my role in this study was that of a researcher, not a school principal. All efforts were made to reduce this discomfort. The fact that I was no longer working in the Beaverton School District at the time of the interviews seemed to have helped in this area. Each participant was also given the opportunity to decide to terminate the interview at any time; none chose this option.

A potential benefit for participation in this study was the opportunity for the students to reflect upon their school journey from middle school into their high school years and tell their story with the knowledge that their participation could help other students successfully make that journey. Students who agreed to participate also received a movie pass as a thank you for their timely return of the survey and for participation in the interviews if selected. A detailed chart of participant information may be found in Appendix D.

<center>Data Collection and Analysis</center>

The avenues used to investigate the problem and research question and sub-questions are presented in this section. The research approach was primarily qualitative as was described earlier in this chapter. Creswell (1998) described

qualitative research as an intricate fabric composed of minute threads, many colors, different textures, and various blends of material. He said, "This fabric is not explained easily or simply" (p. 13). The surveys and final GPA archival record of the participants provided additional quantitative information. Weaving together the interview, survey, and archival information provided the opportunity to triangulate the results. Patton (2002) stated, "Triangulation strengthens a study by combining methods" (p. 247). This allowed exploration of the students' perspectives of their success or lack of success in high school and to explain how their participation in the SOS program may or may not have influenced that experience. Listed below are the methods of data collection and analysis utilized in this research.

Surveys

Surveys are a popular tool for conducting research. They are used to describe the characteristics of a certain population (Fraenkel & Wallen, 1996). The population of the SOS program participants in the study was small but informative in generating some common perceptions among the students.

In this study, 37 students who participated in the SOS program were invited to complete a survey. Twelve surveys were returned, and this survey data was used along with other sources of information to answer research sub-questions two, three, and four:

2. What impact did participation in SOS have on students' experiences in middle school?

3. How did former SOS/Options students feel they were prepared for high

school?

4. How are former SOS/Options students actively engaged in and connected

to high school?

The survey questions were designed to examine the impact of the SOS

program on the students from the participants' perspectives. The questions reflected

knowledge about students at-risk of school failure based upon information gathered

in the literature review and the attributes of high school dropouts. The survey

included five major sections (see Appendix E). The first section asked a series of

questions about specific features of the SOS program. Students were asked to rate

the extent to which the program features were part of their experience while in the

SOS program using a four-point Likert scale where 4 = to a large extent, 3 = to a

moderate extent, 2 = to a small extent, and 1 = not at all. The second through fifth

sections of the survey repeated many of the questions asked in the first section, but

the focus was on students' experiences in their high school years. Students were

asked to rate the extent to which program features in the SOS program were part of

their experiences while in high school. In all sections the same four-point rating

scale is used.

The second section also asked questions about the extent to which students

felt the SOS program prepared them to go on to high school. The reason the later

sections repeat many of the questions that appear in the first section is that the

program features in the SOS program are identified in the literature as important for all students and especially students at-risk of dropping out. The rating scale was selected to enable cross-tabulation of data from students' records with responses to survey items across multiple grade levels.

Table 4 identifies the major and sub-sections of the survey and the number of survey items in each section. The survey took 20 to 30 minutes to complete as reported by students. An individual not associated with the study entered the survey data into a FileMaker Pro database, which was converted to an ASCI file. Data was then exported to an SPSS file for analyses. Methods of analysis included comparisons of averages and percentages and descriptive summaries. The statistical tests selected were based on the research questions. Research sub-questions 2, 3, and 4 ask about the SOS students. I was interested in learning if the SOS program was experienced differently by different groups of students. Therefore, comparisons were made by gender, grade level, grade point average, and participation in high school activities. For example, one comparison looked at differences between students who gave ratings of *a lot* or *moderate* and those who gave ratings of *somewhat* or *not at all* and their final high school GPA. This latter comparison provided a way to see if students who gave higher ratings achieved more academic success in high school.

Table 4

Survey Sections

I. During the SOS Program $N = 23$

    A. Teachers and Counselors ($n = 9$)
    B. Classes and School ($n = 8$)
    C. Your Parents/Guardians ($n = 3$)
    D. Getting Prepared for High School ($n = 5$)

II. First Year of High School $N = 6$

III. Second Year of High School $N = 16$

    A. Teachers and Counselors ($n = 9$)
    B. Classes and School ($n = 4$)
    C. Your Parents/Guardians ($n = 3$)

IV. Third Year of High School $N = 16$

    A. Teachers and Counselors ($n = 9$)
    B. Classes and School ($n = 4$)
    C. Your Parents/Guardians ($n = 3$)

V. Fourth Year of High School $N = 16$

    A. Teachers and Counselors ($n = 9$)
    B. Classes and School ($n = 4$)
    C. Your Parents/Guardians ($n = 3$)

(N = number of questions)

If one looked only at the impact of the entire group of students, it may have masked some important differences among students that impacted the types of recommendations made. Table 5 illustrates how survey data were analyzed and how the information was used in the study.

Table 5

Summary of Survey Data Analyses and Use

Survey Data	Analyses	Purpose
I. During SOS • Activities • Teachers, Counselors, Peers, and Parents • Classes • Feelings about school • Preparing for high school	Descriptive summaries Comparison of averages and percentages.	Determine impact on SOS students' experiences in middle school; preparation for high school; engagement in and connection to high school.
II. During High School • Activities, Engagement in high school • Teachers, Counselors, Peers, and Parents • Classes • Preparedness for high school • Like/dislike about high school • SOS program features	Descriptive summaries Comparison of averages and percentages.	Determine impact on SOS students' experiences in middle school; preparation for high school; engagement and connection to high school.

Interviews

Interviews are conducted to learn about a person's perspective as Patton (2002) told us.

> Qualitative interviewing begins with the assumption that the perspective of others is meaningful, knowable, and able to be made explicit. We interview to find out what is in and on someone else's mind, to gather their stories. (p. 341)

It is not possible to observe things that took place at previous points in time or even to ask people using a survey to understand their feelings and thoughts about their

experiences. Indeed, according to Stake (1995), each person interviewed is expected to have unique experiences and stories to tell.

In this study, nine former SOS students were interviewed. Guest, Bunce and Johnson (2006) stated that six to twelve interviews are sufficient when the aim is to understand common perceptions and experiences among a group of relatively homogeneous individuals. An attempt was made to include an equal number of males and females. As was reported earlier in this chapter, efforts were made to include a mix of gender, grade level, and ethnicity. For students still attending school, interviews were held at the students' schools at a time that did not conflict with classes. For students not currently attending school at the time of the study, interviews were conducted in a public location such as a public library or a school.

The interview approach used is called the "general interview guide approach" (Patton, 2002). This approach relies on an interview guide that lists the questions and issues that will be explored in the course of the interview. Use of an interview guide ensures that the same basic lines of inquiry are pursued with each individual interviewed. The interview guide provides topics or subject areas that the researcher will use to explore, probe, and ask questions that will illuminate the interviewee's experiences with the topic. Although the guide uses a question format, the interviewer has freedom to build a conversation with each individual but with the focus on a particular topic or subject that has been predetermined.

Probes and follow-up questions were used to elicit more detail and increase the

richness and depth of responses -- filling out the descriptive picture (Patton, 2002).

The advantage of developing an interview guide for this study was that it

made certain the interviewer was able to systematically gather the same

information from each individual in a designated period of time. Interviews lasted

from 45 to 60 minutes. The major topics and probes for this study are identified in

Table 6. The complete interview guide can be found in Appendix F.

Table 6

Interview Topics and Probes

During SOS:
- Activities/Sports
- Classes
- Teachers
- Counselors
- Peers
- Parents
- Learning about and preparing for high school

During High School:
- Expectations
- Readiness
- First year/other years
- Activities/Sports
- Classes/Teachers
- Students/Friends
- Like/Dislike about high school
- SOS/Options program

The value of interviews is in capturing what each person says -- his or her

actual words (Patton, 2002). The raw data of interviews are the actual quotations

spoken by interviewees. During each interview, the interviewer took notes using

the format in Table 6. Each interview was audio tape-recorded, with the written

permission of each student and the parent/guardian of students under the legal age of 18.

A graduate student in California with extensive experience transcribing audio tapes and who was not associated with the study transcribed each taped interview. Each tape-recorded conversation began with the interviewer stating the identification code of the student, the date of the interview, and an introductory statement about the content of the interview, what would be asked, how the information would be used, how the responses would be handled, including confidentiality, and a verbal request for permission to tape record the interview. The student was also asked if he/she had any questions. Students were also told they could discontinue the interview at any time.

The analysis of qualitative data is labor intensive and time consuming. Indeed, there is a positive relationship between the richness of the interview and the analysis of the interview. The richer and more substantive and detailed the conversation, the greater the amount of coding and analyses of the interview data in terms of time and complexity. A coding system was developed to reduce the amount of data into manageable chunks of information for analysis. This coding mirrored the interview format found earlier in Table 6.

The challenge of data reduction is not to lose any essential information that provides meaning and understanding to what is being studied. To offset this possibility, the interviewer summarized what the student said about each topic and

probe during the interview immediately after each interview. As was expected, the students generated comments that did not fit within the designated codes. As other themes emerged, additional codes were needed to acknowledge the student voice. Some of those additional codes were

- Schedule of SOS class
- Class size
- Transition to high school activities
- Size of high schools

The value of reviewing and organizing the comments of the students immediately following the interview was important because the purpose for conducting this level of analysis is twofold. First, if there was a malfunction with the tape recorder, everything that is remembered had to have been written down. In fact, this happened briefly during one of the interviews. Second, while the interview was fresh, it was important to write about what was heard and learned during the interview and to think about what was learned within the frame of the research sub-questions the interview questions were designed to answer.

Completing a review of the interview notes after each interview also lessened the feeling of being overwhelmed once the transcripts were returned. It provided an initial assessment of the interview data and how that data related to the codes identified.

After receiving the transcripts of the tape-recorded interviews, the first round of coding was conducted as each transcript was read for the first time from beginning to end. The second round of coding and recoding occurred as necessary after all of the transcripts had received a first round of coding. The purpose for the second round of coding was that much is learned as one codes multiple transcripts.

Once the second round of coding was completed, a summary of the coded responses to each interview question and probe was written in response to each research sub-question. The passage(s) from each transcript that pertained to the sub-question(s) and probe(s) were grouped so that it was possible to analyze what students shared during their interviews.

Decisions about the grouping of coded passages were made after the analysis of survey data was completed. Doing this prompted an interest in disaggregating the interview data in some different ways. For example, an analysis of survey data indicated that there are differences by high school size as reported by students in their ratings of items. This type of verification or triangulation is powerful as a way to build confidence in the findings.

Archival Records

Records, documents, artifacts, and archives constitute a particularly rich source of information (Patton, 2002). They are valuable not only because of what can be learned from them but also as stimulus paths of inquiry that can be pursued through interviews. Program records can also provide a behind-the-scenes look at

program effects that cannot be picked up directly from other methods (Patton, 2002).

Historical program documents were used to address the first research sub-question, which asks why the SOS program was developed. Program documents that describe the design, development, and implementation of the SOS program were analyzed for specific information about the history of the SOS program, including the rationale for developing the program, its design, expected outcomes for students, selection criteria for student participation, and staffing.

Academic records, where available, were used because at-risk students' academic achievement is one of the major indicators for dropping out of school (Farrell, 1990). The Beaverton School District provided the final Grade Point Averages (GPA) for the students in this study as of June 2006. At-risk students who lack academic support in and outside school often perform poorly in class and receive lower grades. Poor grades can result in a loss of credit for required courses. Lack of sufficient credits can result in students falling so far behind that they eventually drop out of school.

<center>Limitations of the Study</center>

First, self-reported data is a limitation of the study. To help address this issue, the triangulation method of data collection was used. Surveys, interview information, and archival records, where available, were cross referenced for

consistency of information. The methods of data collection did, however, provide a way for us to hear from students.

Second, it was very difficult to locate many of the former SOS students who could have been participants in this study. There were 37 potential student participants. Ten of those transferred out of the Beaverton School District and left no contact information, two students elected not to participate and they returned unfilled surveys. The rest did not respond at all. Although great efforts were made to include all former SOS students who could be found, many could not be located. Therefore, their voices are silent, and the variables in their lives are not represented.

Third, one challenge was the nature of the student population in general. When these students were in middle school, they rarely turned in their homework, and this study required that they independently complete a survey and return it to the researcher. Several students never responded to the initial request for participation. The students who did participate in the survey and the interviews, therefore, may represent qualities of maturity or interest that set them apart from other potential participants whose voices are not heard.

Fourth, my relationship with the students as their former school principal may have influenced the way students responded to participation in the study and in ways they may feel they should or should not have responded to questions. Efforts were made to reduce this limitation by acknowledging this relationship with the students and by stressing the importance of their sincere response to questions so

that the experiences they have had can help inform opportunities for other students in the future.

Finally, I was at the center of developing and implementing the SOS program during my time as principal of Five Oaks Middle School which may have unconsciously influenced my interpretation of the data. Creswell (1998) stressed the importance of acknowledging from the outset of a study any possible bias (p. 202). Furthermore, Davitz and Davitz (1996) wrote that researchers commonly have some emotional involvement in the research or they would not be engaged in the activity (p. 18). In order to limit the influence of my ties to the SOS program and the Beaverton School District, I employed a research assistant who primarily helped with coding of data as retrieved from the surveys. This may have provided a different perspective on the themes that emerged. My relationship with students, the SOS program, and the Beaverton School District also provided an advantage because I knew the context of the study very well. However, in the interpretivist tradition and qualitative methodology in which this study is situated, the researcher is seen as an instrument of data collection and analysis. While I have been conscious of my roles and relationships, they have ultimately served the purpose of this study to capture the experiences and voice of SOS students and their transition to and experiences in high school.

Review of Significance

This study is valuable because no formal follow-up has been done in the

Beaverton School District on the influence of the Swingshift Options School

alternative program on the lives of its students and their academic life in high

school. Educators need to know how they can best serve middle school students.

The study also provides the opportunity to learn about components of high school

which have increased the successful transition for students at-risk of dropping out

and those components that do not help.

Just as schools of today differ from those in the past, it is important to ask,

"Who are the students of today?" The realities of what students actually look like

today is quite different from those in the past. Feldman and Elliott (1990) studied

the adolescent experience. They stressed the differences that students today

represent when compared with students previously:

> Compared with the situation of youths in other cultures and at other times, American adolescents now have an unequaled freedom of self-determination in many areas of their lives. For instance, they exert varying levels of control over how vigorously they apply themselves academically; the kind of friends of both sexes that they seek out; and the extent to which they adopt such risky behaviors as smoking, using alcohol or recreational drugs, and engaging in early or promiscuous sexual intercourse. Longer-range decisions that adolescents increasingly make for themselves include the length and type of formal education, career direction, and mate selection. What is of concern is that most early adolescents are making such choices while their thinking still tends to focus largely on the here and now rather than on longer-range eventualities. As a result, a better understanding of exactly how current attitudes toward adolescence affect immediate and long-term outcomes for individuals should be of considerable general interest. (p. 3)

SOS students have struggled with many of the issues of self-determination that are described above. This was another important reason to investigate the SOS students' attitudes about their Swingshift Options School experiences and their transition into high school.

Holland and Mazzoli (2001) also summed up what students in the urban school of today look like. Although the students in this study do not technically come from an urban school, the description Holland and Mazzoli used matched the description of the students I saw at Five Oaks Middle School.

> What today's high school teachers see when they look out at the sea of students is a hodgepodge of hormones, hairstyles, and heredity. They also see reflections of what lies beneath: abuse, fear, optimism, pain, alienation, distrust, confidence, failure, and a wide range of characteristics and attitudes born of the circumstances that each person has been fortunate to experience or forced to endure. (p. 296)

A student's decision to drop out of school in high school often has its roots in middle school. Bridgeland et al. (2006) advised that schools should devise district-wide early warning systems to help identify students who they believe are at-risk for failing in school. Wells (1989) reported "Dropout prevention must be targeted at the middle school grades, when the stresses of schooling related to a more complex curriculum, a less personal environment, and the growing need for peer acceptance pose grave danger to already disadvantaged students" (p. 2). The need for early intervention is just one more reason why this study is important.

Summary

The purpose of this qualitative and quantitative study is to understand the perspectives of so-called at-risk middle school students who participated in an alternative mid-level program and the support that program may have provided in their transition into high school.

All interview, survey, and archival data were analyzed for the purpose of (a) exploring and forming impressions, (b) identifying themes, (c) looking for consequences and relationships, (d) developing and testing working hypotheses, and (e) assimilating results from different measures such as the participant surveys or student records to present a complete picture of the impact of participation in the Swingshift Options School alternative educational pathway on middle school students' transition to high school. The relationship among the research question, sub-questions, and data sources (see Appendix G) will help focus this picture.

By using qualitative and quantitative research methods (i.e., structured interviews, surveys, document reviews), this instrumental case study examined closely the experiences of selected at-risk students as they transitioned from SOS to high school and how those experiences influenced their success in high school. The case studies of the SOS students hopefully provide useful first-hand information that only their voices can provide.

This chapter explained the methods used in this study to examine the experiences of former SOS students and their transition into high school. The next chapter presents the results obtained using these methods.

CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS

This study examined the perspectives of so-called at-risk middle school

students who participated in an alternative middle school program (Swingshift

Options School) and the support that experience may have provided in their

transitions into high school. The study was particularly designed to investigate

what the voices of students said about the impact of their experiences. To honor the

confidentiality of the students, teacher, and counselors, pseudonyms have been

used.

At the time the data was collected, one of the study group had dropped out

of school in the 10th grade, three had graduated from high school, and one had

transferred to an outdoor challenge program. The remainder were either nearing

graduation or were extending their 12th grade.

This chapter is organized in terms of the overarching research question:

How did participation in the Five Oaks Swingshift Options School (SOS) impact

selected students at-risk of school failure and their transitions to and success in high

school? This research question is more fully explored through the focus of several

investigative sub-questions below which serve as the organizing structure for this

chapter.

1. Why was the SOS program developed?

2. What impact did participation in SOS have on students' experiences in middle school?

3. How did former SOS/Options students feel they were prepared for high school?

4. How are former SOS/Options students actively engaged in and connected to high school?

5. What conditions need to be present for students to remain in high school?

Due to the nature of the first sub-question, it is addressed only by archival information and the experiences of the researcher. The results of the 12 student surveys are organized by the second, third, and fourth sub-questions. These findings are followed by pertinent information gained from the nine student interviews which adds richness to the survey data. The fifth sub-question is explored through the student interviews. The survey results are reported by a Likert scale. The Likert scale for the survey results is as follows:

1 = Not at All

2 = To a Small Extent

3 = To a Moderate Extent

4 = To a Large Extent

Additionally, coding for the interviews was organized to integrate with the survey questions under the following coding headings. Starting with the surveys, each coded area was explored then deepened with insights from the student interviews.

During SOS –

    Activities

    Teachers/Counselors/Peers/Parents

    Classes

    Feelings About School

    Preparing for High School

During High School –

    Activities/Engagement in High School

    Teachers/Counselors/Peers/Parents

    Classes

    Preparedness for High School

    Like/Dislike About High School

    SOS/Options Program Features

Through the integration of survey and interview data, the voices of students highlighted several themes. These topics, as identified by the researcher, are listed below and will be more fully discussed later.

- Relationships with teachers, counselors, and peers

- Beneficial SOS scheduling

- Small class size

- Transition to high school can be improved

- Comprehensive high schools often overwhelming for ninth graders

Research Sub-Question #1

1. Why was the SOS program developed?

All students deserve to have educational opportunities which allow them to make sense of their world and to maximize their capacity as learners. Unfortunately, many students lose their academic direction especially during their middle school years. Finding ways to motivate and reengage these students is a challenge that parents and teachers often face. At Five Oaks Middle School, the administrators and teachers became very concerned about the lack of educational options for students for whom the traditional middle school environment was not working. This concern was presented to one of the Assistant Superintendents in the Beaverton School District. Dr. Tom Roberts listened and took action. He found grant funding for us to pilot the SOS program in April 1999, and the Swingshift Options School was born.

As the principal at Five Oaks at that time, I began to research various options programs for middle school students during the fall of that school year. Along with Amanda Rodriques, one of my assistant principals, I attended the National Middle School Conference in Denver to investigate options programs. We found that most of the programs presented were focused on students who had been selected based upon their history of disciplinary issues. We, on the other hand, were looking for a way to serve students who had experienced limited success in their regular classroom setting, whose primary issue was lack of academic progress, not disciplinary concerns. We found we had to create something new to provide the alternative educational setting we wanted which emphasized student voices and

choices. (The statistical details of the selection process and early organization of the SOS program were discussed in detail in chapter 1 and will not be repeated here.)

The Beaverton School District provided academic, attendance, behavior, and free or reduced-price lunch records for all students at Five Oaks to reduce the chance of overlooking a student at-risk of dropping out that teachers and staff did not identify. In addition to this statistical data, we requested comments from teachers and counselors using the Swingshift Options School Applicant form. Students were also interviewed to evaluate their motivation and willingness to participate, and the parents of all identified students were consulted. Parents were also invited to informational meetings to help explain the organization of the SOS program and to meet the teacher.

Comments from parents during the initial information meeting were very compelling. "I wish this type of school was available when I was a student." This statement was made by one parent and echoed by many others. The appreciation parents expressed for the creation of the SOS program was also strong. When asked if there were any questions, one father responded, "Do you accept raves?"

Through these meetings, we hoped to begin to build a relationship between the students and their parents/guardians with our school based upon the belief that schools are organizations where relationships form the key unit for success, and school leaders need to know how to explore and understand the interplay within their organization. The relationships between parent and child, between teacher and students, and between administration and staff are primary elements in our schools.

In developing the SOS program, we wanted a new way to move our school

forward. Wheatley (1992) offered inspiration as we looked at new ways of thinking

about organizations and our school:

> There is a new kind of freedom, where it is more rewarding to explore than
> to reach conclusions, more satisfying to wonder than to know, and more
> exciting to search than to stay put. (p. 7)

In establishing the SOS program, we were willing to search rather than to stay put.

<div align="center">Research Sub-Question #2</div>

2. What impact did participation in SOS have on students' experiences in

middle school?

The survey and interview data that address each research sub-question are

presented in alignment with the coding referenced earlier in this chapter to help

follow the stream of information regarding each sub-question as students recalled

their experiences with features of the SOS program as well as during their high

school years. When looking at the survey results, it is also important to note that

not all students responded to all the questions.

Involvement in School and Community Activities

The students surveyed indicated that while they were in SOS, involvement

in school activities like sports, music, and assisting special education students was

important to them. Also their involvement with community activities (i.e., animal

shelters, senior citizen centers) was personally meaningful to them. The survey

responses presented in the first section of Table 7 support this statement. In fact,

53% of the students responded at the highest level that their involvement in school

activities and service learning activities was positive while in the SOS program. The two survey questions asked during the SOS program were combined into one for later sub-sections of the survey. The positive experience indicated during the middle school years was not replicated in high school. In fact, the combined average reported for the highest Likert scale level during the second, third, and fourth years of high school was only 17%.

Many of the students surveyed and interviewed had completed their middle school SOS experience 4 to 5 years prior to being involved in this study. In the interviews there was strong support for the value of the service learning component of their experience while in SOS. Comments from several students highlight this support. "The service learning projects we did were good. This felt like a real life experience for me" (Luke). "We did a bunch of like community service, like planting plants and helping the homeless and stuff like that, and going to retirement homes. I mean it was fun; I was helping, you know, other people out, and I like doing that" (Luke). "I learned patience as well as, I guess maybe, confidence" (Matt). "I thought it was fun working with senior citizens at the care homes and stuff, taking care of them. It sounded fun so that was a big reason why I decided to do it (SOS), because it was something to do every Friday, you know. Being out in the community and just being good" (Trevor). Participation in the service learning activities in the community was particularly meaningful during the middle school years; however, several students indicated in their interviews that they did not see the direct connection between their service learning activities and their academic work.

Table 7

Survey Questions: Students Involved in School and Community Activities that were Personally Meaningful to Them

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
During SOS: You liked being involved in a variety of school activities such as sports, music, and assisting with special education students.	2(18%)	2(18%)	2(18%)	5(45%)
You liked being involved in service activities in the community such as animal shelters and senior citizen centers.	1(8%)	1(8%)	3(25%)	7(58%)
AVERAGE	3(13%)	3(13%)	5(22%)	12(53%)
2nd Year of High School: You are involved in school and/or community service activities.	1(11%)	3(33%)	4(44%)	1(11%)
3rd Year of High School: You are involved in school and/or community service activities.		2(22%)	5(56%)	2(22%)
4th Year of High School: You are involved in school and/or community service activities.	1(11%)	2(22%)	4(44%)	2(22%)
HIGH SCHOOL COMBINED AVERAGE				(17%)

Relationships with Teachers, Counselors, and Peers

Supportive relationships with teachers, counselors, and peers were important to students during their time in SOS. The relationship with teachers was particularly important in helping students see connections between what the students were studying and with the students' own experiences as reported to a moderate or large extent by 75% of surveyed students. Students also perceived that their teachers and counselors helped them achieve their goals. Teachers encouraged

students to share their ideas and supported what they had to say. Sixty-seven

percent of the students also indicated that to a moderate or large extent they had

good relationships with the other students in their SOS classroom. The relationship

with counselors was less consistent. When considering the relationships with both

teachers and counselors, however, the big variable was the specific person, not the

specific role. Several different teachers and counselors worked with the students

participating in the SOS program. The student voices definitely pointed out the

importance of having strong, caring, and passionate teachers and counselors.

Additionally, parents/guardians played an important role in student perception of

support. Students also felt that teachers and counselors helped them develop and

meet educational goals.

The survey presented the same set of questions pertaining to relationships

with teachers, counselors, and peers to students during their SOS, second, third, and

fourth year of high school. There was not much variation at all from year to year.

That is, students were involved in relationships with teachers, counselors, and peers

that were personally meaningful to them all through high school as well as while in

middle school. There was, however, a slight increase in meaningful relations

reported by the third and fourth years in high school. While in SOS, 58% of the

students reported that they felt their teachers cared about them as a person to a large

extent. By their third and fourth years of high school, 78% of the students reported

this at the highest level. Friendships with students in their classes were at the

highest level by the fourth year of high school as well (see Table 8).

Table 8

Students Involved in Relationships with Their Teachers, Counselors, and Peers that were Personally Meaningful to Them

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
During SOS:				
Your teachers cared about you as a person.		2(17%)	3(25%)	7(58%)
You could talk with your teachers about any problems you were having in school or out of school.	1(8%)	3(25%)	5(42%)	3(25%)
Your teachers helped you see connections between what you were studying and your own experiences.	1(8%)	2(17%)	8(67%)	1(8%)
You could talk with counselors about anything that was bothering you.	1(8%)	5(42%)	3(25%)	3(25%)
Your teachers helped you set goals that you could reach.		3(25%)	7(58%)	2(17%)
Your teachers encouraged you to share your ideas and supported what you had to say.	1(8%)	2(17%)	1(8%)	8(67%)
Your teachers and counselors helped you achieve your goals.		1(8%)	8(67%)	3(25%)
You had a good relationship with the students in your classes.	2(17%)	2(17%)	2(17%)	6(50%)
AVERAGE	6(6%)	20(21%)	37(39%)	33(34%)
2nd Year of High School:				
Your teachers care about you as a person.		3(33%)	1(11%)	5(56%)
You feel comfortable talking with your teachers about any problems you are having in school or out of school.	1(11%)	3(33%)		5(56%)

Table 8 (Continued)

Students Involved in Relationships with Their Teachers, Counselors, and Peers that were Personally Meaningful to Them

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
Your teachers help you see connections between what you are studying and your own experiences.		3(33%)	4(44%)	2(22%)
You can talk with counselors about anything that is bothering you.		4(44%)	2(22%)	3(33%)
Your teachers help you set goals that you can reach.		4(44%)	3(33%)	2(22%)
Your teachers encourage you to share your ideas and support what you have to say.	1(11%)	2(22%)	2(22%)	4(44%)
Your teachers and counselors help you achieve your goals.		3(33%)	5(56%)	1(11%)
You have made friends with the students in your classes.			4(44%)	5(56%)
AVERAGE	2(3%)	22(31%)	21(29%)	27(38%)

3rd Year of High School:

	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
Your teachers care about you as a person.		1(11%)	1(11%)	7(78%)
You feel comfortable talking with your teachers about any problems you are having in school or out of school.	1(11%)	2(22%)	3(33%)	3(33%)
Your teachers help you see connections between what you are studying and your own experiences.		3(33%)	4(44%)	2(22%)
You can talk with counselors about anything that is bothering you.		3(33%)	2(22%)	4(44%)
Your teachers help you set goals that you can reach.		1(11%)	4(44%)	4(44%)
Your teachers encourage you to share your ideas and support what you have to say.		2(22%)	2(22%)	5(56%)
Your teachers and counselors help you achieve your goals.		2(22%)	3(33%)	4(44%)

Table 8 (Continued)

Students Involved in Relationships with Their Teachers, Counselors, and Peers that were Personally Meaningful to Them

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
You have made friends with the students in your classes.			4(44%)	5(56%)
AVERAGE	1(1%)	14(19%)	23(32%)	34(47%)
4th Year of High School:				
Your teachers care about you as a person.			2(22%)	7(78%)
You feel comfortable talking with your teachers about any problems you are having in school or out of school.	1(11%)	1(11%)	4(44%)	3(33%)
Your teachers help you see connections between studying and your own experiences.			4(44%)	5(56%)
You can talk with counselors about anything that is bothering you.	1(11%)	3(33%)	2(22%)	3(33%)
Your teachers help you set goals that you can reach.			4(44%)	5(56%)
Your teachers encourage you to share your ideas and support what you have to say.		1(11%)	4(44%)	4(44%)
Your teachers and counselors help you achieve your goals.			5(56%)	4(44%)
You have made friends with the students in your classes.		1(11%)	1(11%)	7(78%)
AVERAGE	2(3%)	6(8%)	26(36%)	38(53%)

Interviews with students provided additional insight into this topic. During

SOS, the students were in small classes, and this small class size served as both a

plus and a minus for students. The intimacy of the small class of approximately 15 students allowed for more interactions with peers and teachers as student comments below support. If a student had an issue with someone, however, that intimacy made the issue more difficult to handle. Many students really liked the family environment which the smaller class afforded. "We always had the same students, I mean, everyone knew everyone. It was like you didn't have to be shy around them. We were a family" (Trevor). "Smaller classes made a big difference to me. I was struggling with family issues" (Janet).

The impact of the students' relationship with their teachers depended upon the specific personnel as student quotations below indicate. Students voiced varying opinions about their teachers. "They were good teachers. They were very open-minded. They talked to us about things that we were able to talk to them about, just in life, you know" (Trevor). "Ms. X, my 8th grade teacher, me and her really didn't get along. We were two very different people. We looked at life differently. We had very different opinions, but when it came down to it, we respected each other. Like that's what it came down to and that's what Ms X taught us a lot" (Trevor). "Ms. X was seriously bossy. She just got on my nerves" (Megan). "She was very nice. She was very caring. She cared about her students" (Kate). "It's just you got more one-on-one with the teachers, which made it a lot easier for me, especially since I'm like a big attention wanting kind of guy" (Trevor).

The teachers that students admired had certain qualities that were often mentioned in interviews. Those teachers showed students they cared about them, they helped the students feel academically successful, and they were respectful of students.

The relationship of students with their counselors also varied according to personnel and also according to grade level. For example, eighth graders preparing to transition to high school generally had more contact with their counselors. "Her position was mostly helpful at the end of eighth grade when it was time to transfer to high school, and she gave me the option of Merlo High School and told me what I needed to do and gave me other things for me to do" (Luke). "They came in every once in a while to check up on us. Ms. Y came in often. It was like a big counseling session. Yeah, so it was big, like we got to know everyone. I mean, we could talk about any problems that were bothering us" (Trevor). "I was really bad. I was always going to see counselors. I was making up stories about my father abusing me. I was very confused. I think Ms. E was helpful, but she should have found out more about the child abuse. My dad actually got a letter in the mail" (Luke). "I always felt more comfortable with the counselors in junior high" (Luke). "The only time I had any contact with counselors was actually when I got pulled in there to ask if I wanted to go into the (SOS) school" (John).

In summary, students indicated that small classes helped them develop positive relationships with peers and teachers. The specific personnel influenced

the positive or negative relationship between the students and their teachers. Also, students had more contact with their counselors while in SOS than while they were in high school.

Strategies Learned to Help Students Develop and Meet Goals

In this sub-section, the same survey items were asked in SOS, second, third, and fourth year of high school. Students reported support for learning strategies that helped them meet goals. This opinion increased from SOS through high school. There is a slight variation in the second year of high school, which is interesting; perhaps it is what is often called the "sophomore slump." It is also interesting to note that in the third and fourth years of high school, students indicated stronger support from teachers and counselors in helping them meet their goals. By the time the students were seniors, 100% of the surveyed students reported to a moderate or large extent that their teachers helped them set their goals and their teachers and counselors helped them achieve those goals. This represented an increase from 84% reported during their SOS time. The variable of natural student maturation is also a consideration here. One other factor is that one survey participant had dropped out of school in the 10th grade and, therefore, did not respond to any questions for the third or fourth years of high school (see Table 9).

Table 9

Students Learned Strategies to Help Them Develop and Meet Goals

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
During SOS:				
Your teachers helped you set goals that you could reach.		3(25%)	7(58%)	2(17%)
Your teachers and counselors helped you achieve your goals.		1(8%)	8(67%)	3(25%)
AVERAGE		4(17%)	15(63%)	5(21%)
2nd Year of High School:				
Your teachers help you set goals that you can reach.		4(44%)	3(33%)	2(22%)
Your teachers and counselors help you achieve your goals.		3(33%)	5(56%)	1(11%)
AVERAGE		7(39%)	8(44%)	3(17%)
3rd Year of High School:				
Your teachers help you set goals that you can reach.		1(11%)	4(44%)	4(44%)
Your teachers and counselors help you achieve your goals.		2(22%)	3(33%)	4(44%)
AVERAGE		3(17%)	7(39%)	8(44%)
4th Year of High School:				
Your teachers help you set goals that you can reach.			4(44%)	5(56%)
Your teachers and counselors help you achieve your goals.			5(56%)	4(44%)
AVERAGE			9(50%)	9(50%)

During the interviews, students shared more specific information about strategies they learned. Students felt that they developed strategies that helped them meet goals while in SOS. Trevor talked about one helpful strategy.

> We kept a journal which really seemed to help because I could like, day-by-day basis kind of think. Like what'd you do today? I mean, you could write as you were going through the day . . . and then when you got to read through it, you were like okay, this is where I could change and help myself. (Trevor)

Both Matt and Megan offered representative sentiments about the pace of the class instruction. "They gave you time to explore the material for a deeper meaning" (Matt). Matt also commented that his math class had been self-directed and self-paced which worked well for him.

Megan commented,

> They seemed to go a lot slower than mainstream. I mean for mainstream class, everything just goes too fast, and I ended up having like mountains of overdue homework. But for SOS, they took it one step at a time, I didn't have as much as mainstream, but I had one or two pages of overdue homework. It meant that I knew what was going to happen. I knew what we were being tested on. Not everyone is meant for mainstream. Some kids may be brilliant in their future but have trouble in mainstream, that's okay. Like me, I'm like some people keep saying I'm a brilliant artist, brilliant writer. I wasn't meant for mainstream. (Megan)

The survey indicated that learning strategies that helped students set and meet goals increased as they advanced through the grades. The individualized pace of the class and journaling were strategies that were identified as helpful to the students in meeting those goals. Journaling helped them keep up with their work and gave them a place to log their thoughts. The individualized pace of the

classroom was important for different reasons. Megan liked the fact that she could keep up, and Matt appreciated the time he had to dig more deeply into the subject matter.

Students Felt Good About School

Students generally felt good about school and themselves. They liked coming to school each day and had a strong relationship with students in their class. In fact, as the students progressed through their school years, they increasingly liked coming to school. This could reflect that students who stayed in school felt more successful and, therefore, enjoyed coming to school more. The first survey question in Table 10 is asked at all grade levels and supports this statement. By the fourth year of high school, 88% of the students responded at the moderate extent or large extent level that they liked coming to school compared with 58% at those levels during SOS and 59% during the first year of high school.

The survey results indicated that students also felt smart and were able to do what was expected of them during SOS, and while in high school felt good about themselves when they were at school. Being able to come to school later in the day during SOS was a positive factor in student satisfaction as demonstrated by a 75% positive response on the survey question about the SOS schedule. This question was not presented for the high school years since the late start was not a consistent offering in high school.

Relationships between students were positive at all levels, but this

percentage of positive responses also increased as students progressed through the

grades. There was, however, a slight decrease during the fourth year of high school.

The encouragement students reported receiving from their parents about their

school, however, decreased as students moved into their high school years.

Students responded that their parents were interested in what they were learning in

school at the highest level while in SOS and while in their fourth year of high

school. During the second and third years of high school, the percentage of

"moderate extent" to "large extent" decreased an average of 13%. Although data

did not elucidate on the reason for this, it may be that students who had been

struggling had some success in SOS, and they were obviously seeing some success

to have reached their senior year in high school. One wonders if parental interest

flows more easily when students are experiencing success in school.

Table 10

Students Felt Good About School

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
During SOS:				
You liked coming to school each day.	3(25%)	2(17%)	3(25%)	4(33%)
You had a good relationship with the students in your classes.	2(17%)	2(17%)	2(17%)	6(50%)
You felt smart and able to do everything that was expected of you when you were at school.	2(17%)		6(50%)	4(33%)

Table 10 (Continued)

Students Felt Good About School

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
Being able to come to school later in the morning made it easier for you to get enough sleep and feel ready to go to classes.	1(8%)	2(17%)	1(8%)	8(67%)
Learning was easier because you could use a computer to help you with your reading, writing, and math.		3(25%)	8(67%)	1(8%)
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) encouraged you and were there for you when you needed them.	1(8%)	2(17%)	3(25%)	6(50%)
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) were interested in what you were learning and asked you questions about school.		2(22%)	6(67%)	1(11%)
AVERAGE	9(11%)	13(16%)	29(36%)	30(37%)

1st Year of High School:

	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
You liked coming to school each day.	3(25%)	2(17%)	5(42%)	2(17%)
AVERAGE	8(14%)	8(14%)	20(35%)	21(37%)

2nd Year of High School:

	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
You like coming to school each day.	1(11%)	3(33%)	2(22%)	3(33%)
You have made friends with the students in your classes.			4(44%)	5(56%)
You feel good about yourself when you are at school.		1(11%)	5(56%)	3(33%)
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) encourage you and are there for you when you need them.	1(11%)	1(11%)	5(56%)	2(22%)
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) are interested in what you are learning and ask you questions about school.	1(11%)	2(22%)	3(33%)	3(33%)
AVERAGE	3(7%)	7(16%)	19(42%)	16(36%)

Table 10 (Continued)

Students Felt Good About School

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
3rd Year of High School:				
You like coming to school each day. each day.	1(11%)	2(22%)	3(33%)	3(33%)
You have made friends with the students in your classes.			4(44%)	5(56%)
You feel good about yourself when you are at school.		2(22%)	3(33%)	4(44%)
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) encourage you and are there for you when you need them.	1(11%)	3(33%)	3(33%)	2(22%)
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) are interested in what you are learning and ask you questions about school.	1(11%)	3(33%)	2(22%)	3(33%)
AVERAGE	3(7%)	10(22%)	15(33%)	17(38%)
4th Year of High School:				
You like coming to school each day.	1(11%)		4(44%)	4(44%)
You have made friends with the students in your classes.		1(11%)	1(11%)	7(78%)
You feel good about yourself when you are at school.			6(67%)	3(33%)
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) encourage you and are there for you when you need them.	1(11%)	2(22%)	4(44%)	2(22%)
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) are interested in what you are learning and ask you questions about school.	1(11%)	1(11%)	5(56%)	2(22%)
AVERAGE	3(7%)	4(9%)	20(44%)	18(40%)

The interview prompt that investigated if students felt good about school was open-ended. Students were asked, "What stands out the most from being in the SOS program?" Many students had positive things to say about their participation in SOS, although the challenges that some had in their personal lives dominated their comments. When asked if being in SOS changed how he felt about school, Trevor responded, "Yeah, I loved it." He went on to say that he would recommend SOS to other middle school students who were in his situation. His was the most overtly enthusiastic response. Tina commented that the students and teachers stood out the most. "They got along with everyone. They were very open minded. They talked to us about things that we were able to talk to them about, just in life you know" (Tina). "SOS felt kind of, more personal" (Matt). "As soon as I got into SOS, the environment changed completely. We didn't necessarily get lectured. We talked a lot, and we learned a lot, but whenever we had questions, we were able to ask, and uh, the environment was incredibly different when we had less kids because it was less distractions involved" (Sean).

Other voices offered different opinions. "The only reason I like being in there was because I wasn't doing any work. And I mean, I'm a kid, I don't want to do nothing. My home life was very violent. My parents were alcoholics. And then my dad dying in 8th grade" (Kate). "Not a big fan of school, and I did very little of homework; I wasn't exactly motivated by anything. I was drawn, in middle school

and high school, to more social type things but not so much in middle school. But the biggest thing was just not really into homework" (John).

The schedule of the SOS option was supported to a large extent by students. Being able to start their school day later in the mornings seemed worthwhile to students and they did not seem to mind staying longer in the afternoons.

> I loved getting . . . being able to get my rest in the day. I mean it was only an hour later we'd go home, but I mean it just made time fly so fast. And if we didn't have it (homework) done all the way, in the morning, you could wake up and get it done before you go to school. (Trevor)

> I actually enjoyed it (i.e., the schedule). One of my main struggles was actually getting up on time and getting to school, and with the extra hour of sleep. Well, it was definitely a stark change from my previous year in middle school. I would say that I definitely increased my level of learning, in fact so much that where even if I was late I would take the trek to school. (Matt)

"I didn't feel as tired as I did early mornings. And, therefore, less tired means more focused on school" (Megan).

During their time in the SOS program the survey findings and the interview comments support the statement that the students felt good about school even though many of them were facing personal challenges. They felt that learning was improved and pointed to the schedule, the pace of instruction, the relationships among peers and their teachers as important factors in their feelings about school.

Middle School Students Preparedness for High School

When reflecting upon their preparation for high school during their middle school years, students expressed confidence in their preparation; however, they did

not feel that many of the orientation activities designed to help this transition were helpful to them. Table 11 below shows that only 17% reported to a large extent that visits to the high schools were helpful, and only 8% reported to a large extent that meetings with the high school counselors helped them prepare.

Table 11

Middle School Students Felt Prepared for High School

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
During SOS:				
Your teachers and counselors gave you information about high school programs and courses that helped you get ready for high school.		2(17%)	4(33%)	6(50%)
Your visits to high schools helped prepare you for what to expect in high school.	2(17%)	5(42%)	3(25%)	2(17%)
Your meetings with high school counselors helped prepare you for high school.	3(25%)	3(25%)	5(42%)	1(8%)
Your teachers and counselors in SOS helped prepare you for high school by supporting and encouraging you to take new challenges.	1(9%)		6(55%)	4(36%)
You felt ready to go on to high school at the end of 8th grade.	1(8%)	2(17%)	4(33%)	5(42%)
AVERAGE	7(12%)	12(20%)	22(37%)	18(31%)

Students expressed more confidence in the information offered them by their SOS teachers and counselors than from the high school personnel. Thirty-six percent of the surveyed students reported to a large extent that their SOS teachers

and counselors gave them information about high school programs and provided

them courses that helped prepare them academically. Sub-question #3 will later

address high school preparation and transition from the perspective of these

students after arriving in high school.

Students were asked what they remembered about any SOS experiences that

helped or did not help them when they prepared to move into high school. They

talked about the various opportunities they had to learn about the high school

choices that were available to them. The high school orientation and transition

activities included visitations to high school sites, visits by high school personnel

and high school students at the middle school site, and information presented by

SOS teachers and counselors. As was reflected in the survey data, students

highlighted information received from SOS personnel as most significant in the

survey. "The counselors were mostly helpful at the end of eighth grade when it was

time to transfer to high school. Ms. Y (SOS counselor) gave me the option of Merlo

and told me what I needed to do and gave me other things for me to do" (Luke).

"Ms. X (SOS teacher) had a formal way of doing that kind of stuff. She had like a

survey kind of thing, like what kind of things you would do, and then, she like, well

you could do this and this and this. She just helped us along. I mean, it was pretty

helpful" (Trevor). Janet commented about her visit to one of the comprehensive

high schools. "It was HUGE!! I knew I'd get lost there. Ms. S [SOS teacher]

encouraged me to go to Arts and Communication High School. I had to write

essays and be interviewed to get in. I also visited A & C and shadowed a student. That helped me know that was a good place for me" (Janet).

Tina described in detail the opportunities she had to learn about the various high school options available to her.

> They told me, asked me what high school I wanted to go to, and I told them Aloha, so they gave me a paper saying okay, well these are your class options and they told me, they explained some things about theater [classes]. I heard about Merlo about their night school about their science class that they have there. I heard about the Arts and Communication, but those classes for me, they have certain I guess expectations that I guess they expect you to do. And that's why I picked Aloha because it was a little more free, but yeah, they explained to me a little bit about Westview. They told me about some other things they had going on there. And they showed me maps of the schools too like I said. So they showed me a lot of options about everything and showed me what the schools were like. And tried to explain to me about how some teachers are, and how the principals were, how the counselors were. I mean they showed it all to me. (Tina)

Tina also visited the campuses of Aloha and Merlo and shadowed students on both campuses.

In contrast, Kate had almost no memory of any transition or orientation activities. "No, I don't remember about hearing about the high schools. No, I didn't visit any high school" (Kate).

The survey data indicate that students felt ready for high school while in 8th grade, but in their interviews several expressed concerns. Trevor stated, "I'm still not ready for high school." When Janet was asked if she felt ready for high school, she replied, "No, I was very nervous about going to high school. I worried about whether or not I would make contact with another teacher like Ms. S" (i.e., SOS

teacher). John expressed concerns along with some confidence. When asked if he felt ready for high school while in the 8th grade, he said, "At the time no, because everyone builds it up to be so much more than it is . . . . I was scared of like going into it [high school] because like I said, they build you up to think it's something else, but academically I thought I was okay" (John).

This section focused on how the students felt about how they were prepared to transition to high school during their 8th grade year in SOS. In summary, both the survey and interviews point to the value they placed on information they received from their middle school counselors and teachers over that which they received from high school personnel. Research sub-question #3 revisits their perception of preparedness for high school after the students enrolled in 9th grade and beyond.

Research Sub-Question #3

3. How did former SOS students feel they were prepared for high school?

This research sub-question was first explored through survey questions and interview prompts which focused on how students reflected upon their first year of high school. Two of the survey questions were asked again in reference to the students' experiences in their second, third, and fourth years of high school. These two questions explored their comfort level in school with friends and themselves. The results of their responses are reported below (see Table 12).

Table 12

Students Felt Prepared for High School

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
1st Year of High School:				
You felt well prepared academically when you started high school.	1(8%)	4(33%)	5(42%)	2(17%)
You had supportive teachers and counselors who cared about how you were doing and helped you adjust to high school.	1(8%)	3(25%)	3(25%)	5(42%)
You were able to make friends with other students in your classes.	1(9%)	2(18%)	2(18%)	6(55%)
You knew how to become involved in activities and hook up with other students who had interests like yours.	1(8%)	2(17%)	5(42%)	4(33%)
You felt good about yourself when you were in school.	2(17%)	3(25%)	4(33%)	3(25%)
AVERAGE	6(10%)	14(24%)	19(32%)	20(34%)

Prepared for First Year of High School

During their first year of high school, only 17% of the students surveyed indicated that they felt academically prepared to a large extent for high school. Sixty-seven percent reported to a moderate or large extent that they had supportive teachers and counselors who cared about them. Seventeen percent of the students reported "not at all" when surveyed about whether they felt good about themselves during their first year of high school.

Two survey questions were asked to explore how students felt about themselves when they were in high school and if they were able to make friends in class (see Table 13). Perceptions improved after the first year of high school which is to be expected as students became more familiar with the procedures in high school. It must be noted that only nine students responded to the survey questions about the second, third, and fourth years of high school. Also, of interest, is that 17% of the students reported that during their first year of high school they did not feel good about themselves while they were in school. This was the same percentage reported in 8th grade. By the second, third, and fourth years of high school, however, no responding student indicated at this lowest level on the Likert scale. In fact, by the time the students were in their fourth year, 100% reported to a moderate or large extent that they did feel good about themselves while in school.

Friendships with other students also improved after the first year of high school. During the first year, 73% of the students reported to a moderate or large extent that they were able to make friends with other students in their classes. During the second, third, and fourth years of high school virtually all of the students reported to a moderate or large extent success in making friends. In fact, by the fourth year, 78% of the students reported success to a large extent.

Table 13

Shared Perceptions of High School

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
1st Year of High School:				
You were able to make friends with other students in your classes.	1(9%)	2(18%)	2(18%)	6(55%)
You felt good about yourself when you were in school.	2(17%)	3(25%)	4(33%)	3(25%)
AVERAGE	3(13%)	5(22%)	6(26%)	9(39%)
2nd Year of High School:				
You have made friends with the students in your classes.			4(44%)	5(56%)
You feel good about yourself when you are at school.		1(11%)	5(56%)	3(33%)
AVERAGE		1(5%)	9(50%)	8(44%)
3rd Year of High School:				
You have made friends with the students in your classes.			4(44%)	5(56%)
You feel good about yourself when you are at school.		2(22%)	3(33%)	4(44%)
AVERAGE		2(11%)	7(39%)	9(50%)
4th Year of High School:				
You have made friends with the students in your classes.		1(11%)	1(11%)	7(78%)
You feel good about yourself when you are at school.			6(67%)	3(33%)
AVERAGE		1(5%)	7(39%)	10(56%)

The transition into high school and the students' perception of their preparedness for high school varied greatly from student to student. This was apparent in their very interesting interview responses. Luke felt he was ready and had a good transition. "I thought it was going to be a lot harder than it was, but it wasn't too much of a difference. I wasn't overwhelmed by anything" (Luke). This student attended Merlo Station. Michael began his high school career at a large comprehensive high school and struggled academically his first year. His parents encouraged him to transfer to Merlo Station his second year where he began to show academic improvement.

"I'm not meant for mainstream," said Megan. This student spent two years in a comprehensive high school before transferring to the Night School program at Merlo Station. As she reflected back on her time prior to SOS and during her first two years of high school, she said

> The fact that thinking back to sixth grade and I was terrible in the mainstream class. And thinking back to now, and I'm still in the same boat after I got out of SOS. So basically I wasn't meant for mainstream. I mean, I saw a bumper sticker in a catalog I applied to one time. They have these funny bumper stickers at the beginning of the catalog, and there's this one I caught that said, "Drowning in the mainstream," and I'm like, that's me. (Megan)

When asked about her first year in high school at the Arts and Communication High School (A & C), Janet responded that the smallness of the classes at A & C and the sense of community there worked well for her. "A & C was what I expected pretty much. It was more focused and there was more

homework. More was expected." This student also expressed concern, "Westview would have been tough."

Kate also had an interesting story to tell. She moved to California to live with a relative to begin high school. She explained this by saying, "I guess I just wanted to start over; I mean I was in a lot of trouble. And I just wanted to get away from all the friends, all the bad influences I was around." When describing her 9th grade year she said, "Well, it was very hard. And I wasn't ready. And like English. I was like reading at a fifth grade level and that wasn't good."

John also shared insights about his transition to high school when asked if he felt ready. "I did, I did. Um, I mean I was scared of like going into because like I said they build you up to think it's something else, but academically I thought I was okay." When further questioned about once he got to high school, was it what he expected, he responded with the following.

> Uh, it wasn't, I fell right back into the same rut I was before SOS. Because you go from, Merlo had small classes but not 13 kids you know. So when you get back there, no one's watching you really again. You just fall back into the not doing the homework, you know, slacking off. Also, you're meeting all these new kids so you're paying more attention to your friends than you are to work. (John)

Tina, who had dropped out of school and then reentered, offered the following thoughts about her high school entry:

> Um, you know, high school is way tough I guess you could say. The more, the older you get, the more things you start to notice, you know, when it come to life. So I was just, I started slacking, and I went through my pretty lazy stage where I was just like, I didn't want to go to school. I was, I felt very uh, out of place when it came to things because I guess you could say I

was discovering new things about myself and uh, things around me. And high school's tough. So I actually dropped out for four months my junior year and I got back in, and I was doing good until this year. And I had some issues that occurred in my life, and I slacked off again for about two months. And I'm back again. And I'm just going to do it now. I'm 17, and I look at it as I've got to grow up, do my things so here I am. (Tina)

"My parents wanted me to go to a regular high school and see if I could make it change, seeing if it'd work for me better. And it didn't" (Sean). This student remained at a comprehensive high school for four years and until his 18th birthday when he could legally make his own decision about where to attend school. He transferred to Merlo Station where he repeated his senior year. Two other students expressed interest in attending smaller options high schools but were discouraged from doing so by their parents.

The student comments were as unique as each student and his or her individual circumstances. For most, their first year of high school was challenging. They seemed unsure of the unknown as they started down the high school path. The survey results also reflected the difficulty of that first year of high school but also demonstrated improved feelings about school and increased friendships with peers.

<center>Research Sub-Question #4</center>

4. How were former SOS students actively engaged in and connected to high school?

This sub-question tries to explore the connection between engagement in high school and student success academically. For this reason some of the investigative categories were delved into more through the interview process than

through the survey instrument. For example, one interview question was, "In thinking back to the SOS program, are there particular things that were in the SOS program that are present in your high school that you like; how about things that you wish were at this high school?" The information gained from this type of question would be difficult to ascertain from a survey question.

Engagement in School and/or Community Activities

Evaluating the engagement of students in their school and community activities was explored through a direct survey question. The interview follow-up prompts asked about participation in sports, clubs, music organizations, or any other activities the students joined as well as questions about what their classes were like.

Though the survey question asked during the first year of high school is worded differently than in the other grades, the data across grades can still be compared. In the first and third years of high school, students reported involvement in school and/or community activities at 75% and 78% respectively at the moderate or large extent. During the second year of high school this rating level decreased to 55%. The ratings are presented in Table 14.

During the interviews, students did not identify much engagement in school-sponsored activities such as sports or music. In fact, only one student mentioned participation on the swim team, but this was an intermittent role. Several were involved in technology clubs, activities, or after-school technology training,

and three students had involvement with drama. The students did, however, have things to say about their classes. These comments often merged with comments about relationships with their teachers, so many of the student quotations and comments transition into the next category which deals with relationships with teachers, counselor, and peers in high school.

Table 14

Student Engagement in School and Community Activities

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
1st Year of High School: You knew how to become involved in activities and hook up with other students who had interests like yours.	1(8%)	2(17%)	5(42%)	4(33%)
2nd Year of High School: You are involved in school and/or community service activities.	1(11%)	3(33%)	4(44%)	1(11%)
3rd Year of High School: You are involved in school and/or community service activities.		2(22%)	5(56%)	2(22%)
4th Year of High School : You are involved in school and/or community service activities.	1(11%)	2(22%)	4(44%)	2(22%)

Matt described how his day included classes at his high school and also at the local community college where he could get more advanced technology classes. This schedule made it difficult for him to be involved in school activities.

When asked about whether she participated in any school activities, Megan said, "No, there was this part for drama class that I got. It didn't really count. It was

basically it's a theater design class . . . it was actually part of the class, I didn't do it voluntarily. Other than that, nothing." This student also described the problem that many of the students experienced. Since she was behind in earning her high school credits, she was also attending some night school classes to make up those credits. This conflicted with some activities she might have joined.

> It's not that I don't want to, it's the fact that I don't have enough time to. Because at night school and some classes [activities] close down during the classes I'm in. Like, um, like drama class, I wouldn't mind being in that but it collides with some of my classes . . . most of my classes start at 3:00 pm. (Megan)

Janet was the exception to the interview group. She attended the Arts and Communication High School and participated in the school choir. In her words, "I did choir and advanced choir. I don't read music, but I did the best I could. Our school was exceptional. I felt like I was someplace really big and important."

Kate was involved in dance, but not formally through the school. "We were our own little group. We didn't have an instructor to instruct us. We did everything on our own. And we showed everybody at the pep rallies and stuff like that." Kate, like several others, had a difficult home life and actually withdrew from school due to incarceration in ninth grade. She eventually graduated in 2005 and went on to attend college.

John was not happy with his classes the first two years in high school when he had to take mandatory classes. ". . . they made you read a certain book. They don't let you choose something, and you have to read this book. You know, one of

the books that schools somehow have thousands of." He felt he turned things around academically by his junior year, however, as he expresses below.

> You get more control so you have to say, like I had a Spanish 2 Advanced class that had, I think, six people in it. It was just tiny, and you get to know some of your teachers a lot more. They start to know you a lot better, just because, where as a normal high school setting, if I went to Westview, the teachers would change every year. This one [Merlo] you got to be with the same what, five teachers hounding you the entire time. And they will eventually break you. They will find a way. I literally had a teacher that would literally kick me in the hall if I was sitting down . . . that was senior year because I was trying to graduate. He was pulling every string possible to get me to graduate. (John)

Tina was on an Individual Education Plan (IEP) during her high school years. Her IEP teacher and her mother helped define her course of study. She was, however, enrolled in a drama class that allowed her to learn how to build sets for the plays. She stayed in this class for four years and assumed a role of responsibility. She describes this experience below.

> I do theater, I'm like a group leader in there. So I help students; I teach them how to work with the handsaw. I teach them how to use a nail gun. Yeah, I have to teach them safety precautions. I have to be like an adult in the class. I'm like a teacher. So, that's what I do, and it's pretty fun. (Tina)

Kate said she did not get involved in sports or cheerleading because it was too expensive. She added, however, that she thought students needed activities after school to help reduce the drug and violence problems.

In summary, the students indicated on their surveys that they were involved in school and/or community activities during high school, but the activities they described in their interviews were more peripheral in nature. This was due in part to

their school schedules which conflicted with sponsored activities (i.e., night school,

community college courses), and the participation fees were a problem for at least

one student.

Relationships in High School with Teachers, Counselors, and Peers

Fewer survey questions exploring relationships with teachers, counselors,

and peers were asked about the first year of high school than were asked about the

other years. The questions were also formulated in a slightly different manner

which can be seen in Table 15. For example, during the first year of high school the

survey reads, "You were able to make friends with other students in your classes."

In the second, third, and fourth years, the survey reads, "You have made friends

with the students in your classes." The items asked across the years, however, are

very similar, so the data are comparable. Across all grade levels approximately one-

quarter of the respondents gave lower ratings of not at all or to a small extent when

surveyed about relationships. As students progressed up through the grades, the

relationships with peers became stronger while relationships with teachers and

counselors remained more static. During the first year of high school, 55% of the

students reported that they were able to make friends with other students to a large

extent. By the fourth year of high school, 78% reported at this level that they had

made friends with classmates.

Table 15

Students are Able to Form Relationships with Teachers, Counselors, and Peers

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
1st Year of High School:				
You had supportive teachers and counselor who cared about how you were doing and helped you adjust to high school.	1(8%)	3(25%)	3(25%)	5(42%)
You were able to make friends with other students in your classes.	1(9%)	2(18%)	2(18%)	6(55%)
AVERAGE	2(9%)	5(22%)	5(22%)	11(48%)
2nd Year of High School:				
You feel comfortable talking with your teachers about any problems you are having in school or out of school.	1(11%)	3(33%)		5(56%)
You can talk with counselors about anything that is bothering you.		4(44%)	2(22%)	3(33%)
Your teachers encourage you to share your ideas and support what you have to say.	1(11%)	2(22%)	2(22%)	4(44%)
You have made friends with the students in your classes.			4(44%)	5(56%)
AVERAGE	2(6%)	9(25%)	8(22%)	17(47%)
3rd Year of High School:				
You feel comfortable talking with your teachers about any problems you are having in school or out of school.	1(11%)	2(22%)	3(33%)	3(33%)
You can talk with counselors about anything that is bothering you.		3(33%)	2(22%)	4(44%)
Your teachers encourage you to share your ideas and support what you have to say.		2(22%)	2(22%)	5(56%)

Table 15 (Continued)

Students are Able to Form Relationships with Teachers, Counselors, and Peers

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
You have made friends with the students in your classes.			4(44%)	5(56%)
AVERAGE	1(3%)	7(19%)	11(31%)	17(47%)
4th Year of High School:				
You feel comfortable talking with your teachers about any problems you are having in school or out of school.	1(11%)	1(11%)	4(44%)	3(33%)
You can talk with counselors about anything that is bothering you.	1(11%)	3(33%)	2(22%)	3(33%)
Your teachers encourage you to share your ideas and support what you have to say.		1(11%)	4(44%)	4(44%)
You have made friends with the students in your classes.		1(11%)	1(11%)	7(78%)
AVERAGE	2(6%)	6(17%)	11(31%)	17(47%)

During the interviews only two students indicated that they had a wide group of friends. "I'm considered a social bug, so I'm really good with groups and being a leader. And I'm still Ms. Popular, the funny one at school although when the time is right" (Kate). Another student stated that she had a wide group of friends in high school (Janet). Most of the students indicated that they had a smaller group of friends or that they struggled with friendships. "I tried to get along with everyone. Some people just didn't like me. They thought I was annoying, whatever, I didn't really mind. But some people did like me and that was cool. But I guess

you could say I got along with everyone when we were all in good moods" (Tina). John said that he had hung out with the same group of five girls all through high school. Luke had an interesting assessment of his social status. He stated, "I don't socialize with a lot of people enough to actually have them as close personal friends."

Trevor said that a lot of the kids he knew from SOS went to other schools and he had limited communication with them. When asked if it would have helped him in his transition to high school if he could have stayed together with his SOS classmates he responded, "Yeah, I think it would have helped."

Students often talked about their relationship with teachers and to a lesser degree with counselors. They all could identify teachers whom they liked and did not like. Only two students, however, could actually identify their high school counselor. All could identify their middle school counselors by either name or description.

In describing what was best about high school, Megan said, "The teachers aren't really teachers. They're like friends. We don't even call them Mr. S or Mr. C. We just call them John or Bruce or Jen. And we kind of joke around a lot." John was quoted earlier when he talked about the willingness of his teachers to help push and pull him through his senior year. Another student gave little or no credit to teachers or counselors. Kate said, "I've learned it by myself. Everything I've learned, by myself . . . never really had anybody to teach me at home or anything.

I've just done it all by myself." This student did not have a positive student-teacher relationship. Other students shared the importance they found in having that positive relationship with their teachers.

One Merlo student commented about the smaller class sizes and the impact that had on his relationship with teachers. Steven said, "The class sizes are smaller which is something I'm glad to have that you connect more with the teachers. The teachers are less stressed, and it's easier to get to know the teachers since there's only a handful of teachers that you can go to."

> Tina was particularly articulate when describing why she liked her teachers. They're very respectful. They let students be who they are. They accept them. They know that we're not immature people. I mean, they realize that we're going to be society one day. We're going to be, some of us are going to go off into government things. Some of us are going to go off and work at McDonald's. I mean, whatever. And they respect that. They give us the decency of respect. (Tina)

The survey data and interview information together highlight the importance students placed on friendships with peers and positive relationships with their teachers. Student friendships were important, but all but two of the students described their friendship groups as small. With one exception, the students emphasized the importance of knowing their teachers and having their teachers know them.

Impact of School Engagement in High School and Perception of Academic Ability

Reporting on the impact of a student engagement in high school and how that engagement may have influenced a student's perception of his or her academic

ability was difficult. First of all, what is engagement? Both the survey instrument and the interview probes asked questions about involvement in school activities. Additionally, questions were presented to investigate the students' connection to school and their general feeling about being in school. These questions asked if students liked coming to school and if they felt good about themselves when they were in school. Engagement, therefore, was viewed to be a combination of involvement in activities and a positive feeling of belonging in the school community as measured by higher ratings on the survey questions coupled with interview responses.

All the surveyed students who were also interviewed indicated that they felt good about themselves when they were in school at the moderate or large extent by the time they were in their fourth year of high school. These same students, however, had a wider spread of responses during their first year with two reporting to a small extent and one reporting not at all.

The same pattern existed when students responded to whether or not they liked coming to school. With one exception, all surveyed students who were also interviewed liked coming to school at the higher levels by their fourth year of high school. The one exception was a student who reported not at all for all four years of high school. This student's highest rating was with regard to friends in her classes which she rated to a large extent each year the question was asked.

Of interest is the fact that students were also surveyed about their parents'
interest in what they were doing at school and if their parents attended activities in
which they were involved. Parent interest and attendance changed little throughout
the high school years. If they showed interest and attended in the early years of
high school they continued to show interest and attend activities throughout. Three
students reported parental involvement as not at all or to a small extent.

This group of students varied greatly on their identification of their
involvement in activities. Only one student reported at the same level for all four
years of high school. Most had peaks and valleys of activity participation. This did
not seem to be a consistent factor.

When looking at data from all surveyed students, not just those
interviewed, the responses differ only slightly from the observations presented
above. Generally, the average ratings reflecting engagement in school increased
throughout the high school years. During their first year of high school, 75% of
the students reported to a moderate or large extent that they knew how to
become involved in activities and how to hook up with other students who had
interests like theirs. During the second year of high school, 55% of the students
surveyed reported to a moderate or large extent that they were involved in
school or community activities, and all of them reported that they had made
friends with students in their classes. By the fourth year of high school,
involvement in school and communities activities was reported by 88% of the

students at the moderate and large extent, and friendships were still strong at 89%.

Parental interest and involvement reported by all surveyed students had some slight variances. Students reported that their parents were interested in what they were learning at school and asked questions about school only to a small or moderate extent. Fifty-five percent of the students reported at this level during their second and third years of high school. This increased to 67% for fourth year students.

When surveyed about whether parents attended activities the students were involved in during and/or after school, none of the second or third year students reported at the large extent level. During the second year of high school, 78% reported to a small or moderate extent. By the third year of high school, 88% of the students reported at this level. Interestingly, by the fourth year of high school, 66% of the students reported at the small or moderate extent level with 22% reporting to a large extent parents attended activities that involved the students. Details about the student survey responses are found in Table 16.

In the interview process, students were also asked how they would describe themselves as students. When asked this question, Megan replied, "Um, straight A's and um, pretty loose. Like um, first term I was being lazy and I took only two classes. But now, hopefully, I'm going to be an early graduate because I'm like

three credits away from graduating." Matt said, "If I did my homework, I'd get straight A's."

Table 16

Student Engagement in High School Activities

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
1st Year of High School:				
You knew how to become involved in activities and hook up with other students who had interests like yours.	1(8%)	2(17%)	5(42%)	4(33%)
You felt good about yourself when you were in school.	2(17%)	3(25%)	4(33%)	3(25%)
You liked coming to school each day.	3(25%)	2(17%)	5(42%)	2(17%)
AVERAGE	6(17%)	7(19%)	14(39%)	9(25%)
2nd Year of High School:				
You like coming to school each day.	1(11%)	3(33%)	2(22%)	3(33%)
You are involved in school and/or community service activities.	1(11%)	3(33%)	4(44%)	1(11%)
You have made friends with the students in your classes.			4(44%)	5(56%)
You feel good about yourself when you are at school.		1(11%)	5(56%)	3(33%)
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) are interested in what you are learning and ask you questions about school.	1(11%)	2(22%)	3(33%)	3(33%)
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) attend activities you are involved in during and/or after school.	2(22%)	2(22%)	5(56%)	
AVERAGE	5(9%)	11(21%)	23(43%)	15(28%)

Table 16 (Continued)

Student Engagement in High School Activities

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
3rd Year of High School:				
You like coming to school each day.	1(11%)	2(22%)	3(33%)	3(33%)
You are involved in school and/or community service activities.		2(22%)	5(56%)	2(22%)
You have made friends with the students in your classes.			4(44%)	5(56%)
You feel good about yourself when you are at school.		2(22%)	3(33%)	4(44%)
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) are interested in what you are learning and ask you questions about school.	1(11%)	3(33%)	2(22%)	3(33%)
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) attend activities you are involved in during and/or after school.	1(11%)	4(44%)	4(44%)	
AVERAGE	3(6%)	13(24%)	21(39%)	17(31%)
4th Year of High School:				
You like coming to school each day.	1(11%)		4(44%)	4(44%)
You are involved in school and/or community service activities.	1(11%)	2(22%)	4(44%)	2(22%)
You have made friends with the students in your classes.		1(11%)	1(11%)	7(78%)
You feel good about yourself when you are at school.			6(67%)	3(33%)
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) are interested in what you are learning and ask you questions about school.	1(11%)	1(11%)	5(56%)	2(22%)

Table 16 (Continued)

Student Engagement in High School Activities

Survey Questions	Not at all 1	Small Extent 2	Moderate Extent 3	Large Extent 4
4th Year of High School:				
Your parent(s)/guardian(s) attend activities you are involved in during and/or after school.	1(11%)	4(44%)	2(22%)	2(22%)
AVERAGE	4(7%)	8(15%)	22(41%)	20(37%)

Some expressed confidence in their ability to go on into future educational pursuits such as community college or vocational training. Three students were actually already participating in post high school education at the time of their interview, even though they had struggled academically in their early high school years.

Others were more frank in evaluating their challenges. "I'm at great risk to be a dropout because I just can't stand school anymore. It's gotten so boring to the point where I'm sick and tired of it" (Trevor). This student planned to enroll in a military type school to help him get on track. He commented, "I think I need a little more structure than I have." He also described himself as being very intelligent.

Study habits were mentioned by several students. "I'm still trying to do the least I can do to get passed" (John). When asked to describe himself as a student, Steven quickly replied, "Lazy. That's probably like the main one because I have a,

when it come to doing homework, it's not really high up there on the priority list I guess."

As was mentioned earlier in this chapter, very few of the students in this study participated in formally organized school sports or activities. School-sponsored sports were usually not available to them because of poor grades or because the options high schools they attended didn't offer the sports on their campus. Students would have been required to play on teams at one of the comprehensive high schools. There was moderate involvement in drama and choir, however, which did seem significant to the students.

Many of the students reached a maturation point during their high school years that kicked them into a higher gear academically and which resulted in more engagement in school. Sean realized that he was not going to graduate during his senior year. He chose to transfer schools and repeat his senior year. Matt had a similar experience. He initially started high school at a comprehensive high school then transferred to Merlo where he also changed program focus. He began in the Community School section which is more relaxed academically then progressed to the point that he earned admission into the Science and Technology program.

Janet and John described some of their early struggles and wake-up calls.

> I was very depressed by being diagnosed with a learning disability. I cut school often. A friend and I rebelled. We didn't take school seriously, and we got into some bad things . . . nothing really terrible, but not good stuff. She left in the middle of eleventh grade, and I changed totally. I just decided to change. (Janet)

[I]finally started pulling out my junior year. When you start realizing, man, you're not going to graduate if you don't get moving here; you're going to have to. I did end up pulling a year and a half in a year for my senior year. (John)

A determined resiliency was a common thread among many of the interviewed students. Students were faced with their own lack of progress, yet they said things like Janet and John did. Earlier, Tina talked about how she had quit coming to school a couple of times, but she kept coming back. To restate her own words, she said, "I'm back again. And I'm just going to do it this time." One student was actually incarcerated for a period of time during high school and came back to re-enter. This resiliency was apparent when the final Grade Point Averages were paired with the stories of the students.

The Beaverton School District provided the final Grade Point Averages (GPA) for the students who participated in this study. Five of the students had a GPA of 2.0 or better. Two had a GPA lower than 1.0, and one student had earned no high school credits and dropped out after ninth grade (see Table 17).

Kate, Megan, and Janet all had a GPA above 2.0, and they were also interviewed about their perceptions of themselves as students. Janet attended an options high school where she participated in musical activities and told of strong friendships and good relationships with her teachers. She struggled initially but said she pulled herself out of her academic decline in her junior year.

Table 17

Final High School Grade Point Average (GPA) - June 2006

Student	GPA	Year of Final GPA
Tina	.57	still enrolled
Kate	2.75	diploma 2005
John	1.79	diploma 2003
Megan	2.53	diploma 2006
Sean	1.27	still enrolled
Janet	2.8	diploma 2005
Jeff *	2.32	withdrawn 1/17/03 (dropout)
Luke	2.65	diploma 2005
Trevor	1.18	withdrawn 2006
Hall *	.89	withdrawn 2006

*students were surveyed only.

Megan was the girl who described herself as "drowning in mainstream."
She was enrolled in a comprehensive high school for two years before transferring
to an options program. She said around her sophomore year she realized that she
was not meant for mainstream classes. She described herself pretty much as a loner
with few friends and some limited involvement in school drama activities.

Kate has the most complex history. She participated in SOS, but she moved
to another state for some of her early high school years before returning to
Beaverton and graduating from a comprehensive high school. She said she spent
two years catching up academically and that she did this all on her own with no
help from anyone. She also described the fact that she had gotten into a lot of
trouble and finally, midway through high school, decided to be done with her
whole lifestyle. She said, "Being in trouble, [I] started to think and realize that I

wanted to have a future for myself." She even referenced a special program that she attended for a period of time. Kate described herself as very social with a wide circle of friends. During high school she had no formal involvement in school activities due to financial constraints.

Luke and Jeff were the males who earned a GPA of 2.0 or higher, and Luke was also interviewed. Luke attended an options high school and enjoyed the small class size which allowed more one-on-one with his teachers. He described a smooth transition from SOS into high school, because there were similarities in the small classes and the individual attention. He did not participate in formal school-sponsored activities but did seek out enrichment activities in the area of technology for himself. He said he has a different kid of social personality. "I don't socialize with a lot of people enough to actually have them as close personal friends." He said that the best thing about his high school was the small classrooms and the one-on-one with the teacher. He went on to say, "I think that just really seals the deal with students who are getting that one-on-one, being able to come up to the teacher and talk to them and them actually recognizing you."

Tina and Hall were the two students with the lowest GPA's, and Tina was also interviewed. Her voice has been heard prominently throughout this chapter, and her telling statement above gives insight into the strength of her personality and resilience. Tina attended a comprehensive high school and dropped out and reenrolled at least two times. Although she did not talk about a wide circle of

friends, she did identify that she has a small group of good friends. She also was one of the two students who could name her high school counselor who has worked with her as she came and went through the school doors. This counselor also worked with Tina to adjust her school schedule so that she could have late arrival since mornings were hard for her.

Gauging the impact of student engagement in high school and how that engagement may have influenced student perception of academic ability was the challenge of this section. Engagement was viewed to be a combination of involvement in activities and a positive feeling of belonging in the school community as measured by higher ratings on the survey questions coupled with interview responses. Academic ability was probed by asking students directly how they described themselves as students and by examining their final GPA as reported by the Beaverton School District in June 2006.

The survey, interviews, and GPA information all combine to indicate that engagement in school relates to a student's perception of academic ability. Luke and Janet had very positive feelings about themselves at school by the time they were in the final years of high school. They also had GPAs of 2.0 or higher. Janet was more involved with school activities, but both had strong personal interests which they pursued. John and Sean were less academically successful, but they had strong ties to their schools. John graduated, and Sean was on track to graduate.

The two interviewed students with the lowest GPA's were Tina and Trevor. Both of these students are a great risk for dropping out of school although they still describe good feelings about themselves. In some way, both of these students found a type of sanctuary at school, even though they were not experiencing academic success. As reported above in Table 12, Tina was still attending as of June 2006, but Trevor had withdrawn with no further information available.

Other factors of interest include parental involvement, the natural maturation of the students, and the lack of formal involvement in school-sponsored activities by the students. Parental interest and attendance at school events involving their students changed little throughout the high school years. If parents asked their students questions about their school day during the ninth grade, they generally continued to ask questions throughout the high school years. Attendance at school events when students were involved was not a major factor perhaps because most of these students were not involved in formally organized school sports or activities.

Some of the students reached a maturation point during their high school years that kicked them into a higher gear academically which resulted in more engagement in school. This increased engagement supported their academic progress. Kate, John, Megan, and Janet all spoke about the changes they made in their lives.

Research Sub-Question #5

5. What conditions need to be present for students to remain in high school?

What do students say about what they need in high school to help them

remain in school and find success? This question was addressed through the

interview process so that the voices of the students would have room to expand.

Students were asked two open-ended questions. They were first asked to think back

about their SOS experience and identify any particular features in SOS that were

present in their high school that they liked or that they wished were present in their

high school. Second, they were asked to comment about the best and worst things

about their high school (i.e., teachers, classes, activities, other students). The

narrative that emerged from the students was very enlightening. It is important to

remember that the students participating in this study were described as at-risk for

dropping out when they were in middle school.

Students had varying options, of course, but several conditions were

identified consistently. Relationships with teachers were very important. Students

wanted to be known as a person by their teachers, and small classes where this

relationship could develop also seemed important. When asked these two focus

questions, no student mentioned parental involvement at any level, nor did they

mention participation in activities although at other times in the interview, both of

these areas were discussed.

When asked to talk about his high school (Merlo), Steven had a lot to say.

The class sizes are smaller which is something I'm glad to have, that you connect more with the teachers, the teachers are less stressed, and it's easier to get to know the teachers since there's only a handful of teachers that you can go to. There's still the switching every so often during the periods, but the periods are longer here so you gain . . . and you also have Mondays off to do homework and whatever is needed to catch up which just helps me a lot which is something we didn't have for SOS, but we did only have four days of schools which is another thing I'm used to. And there's more of a personal connection with the teachers as they listen to you more. They get more personal with you. They find out more about your personality and talk with you more on a personal level. And it's more of a work environment than a school environment, again because you're not really stressed into doing the work that you're told to do. It just kind of comes to you. And that's what I would think would happen to you if you were in a work environment. (Steven)

Luke talked about wishing two of his favorite teachers could have come to high school with him. "Because that makes it so much easier when you know you can be comfortable and not have to be so gosh [she's] going to kill me type of thing. I can pass a teacher's class when she's nice." He also said he struggled in the comprehensive high school doing whole group class work because switching classes so often didn't allow him to get to know or be known by many of the students. If he made a mistake in his group, he felt the students thought he was just dumb when he described himself as just lazy. He also commented that because he had been in the small SOS program, he did not know as many students when he entered a large comprehensive high school.

Megan attended a comprehensive high school before transferring to the Merlo Night School program. She commented that there was nothing like SOS at

the comprehensive high school, but she added, "Um, for Night School, I think it is an SOS only after dark. You stay in one class until it's time to go." She had a suggestion for the selection of teachers for the SOS program. "When they're looking for a teacher, don't look for someone that used to be a counselor. That's what Ms. X was, and that's why not many of us like her. Because she treated us as if we were troubled kids."

When talking about SOS, Trevor said he was looking for something like it in high school.

> I would definitely say it (SOS) made me love school more because I was thinking if they got things like this for students in middle school, I wonder what they have for people in high school? And I was looking forward to having something like SOS in high school, and they didn't have it. (Trevor)

John commented about the SOS schedule which he thought was awesome. He also liked the service learning opportunities he had in SOS. "When you think of how, it gives you more real life experience. You have to deal with people that aren't your age." He worked at an elementary school and continued to do that some while in high school, too. John also talked about the richness of the teachers he had his senior year. They represented a full spectrum of personalities and areas of expertise. He commented, "I honestly think, I wish that aspect was spread more over the four years. They've seen you grow up. They've seen your leaps and bounds from when you first show up."

Tina said, "I would have to say my favorite thing about this school is a few teachers. I mean, I like a few teachers." She also commented about the service learning opportunity she had in SOS and stated that she wished the high school had tried to get students more involved when it came to the community.

Six of the nine students interviewed attended comprehensive high schools in the ninth grade. Three attended options high schools. At the time of their interviews, only three students were attending or had attended comprehensive high schools most recently. Furthermore, the three students who most recently attended the comprehensive high schools represented the most worrisome students interviewed. One declared she was not meant for mainstream, one was still struggling to graduate at the time of the interview, and the third student planned to transfer to a military type of school. This information in itself is telling. These students needed a smaller learning community.

<div align="center">Summary of Findings</div>

The results presented above indicate clearly that the students in this study experienced difficulty in transitioning to high school from the SOS middle school program. In fact, several of them ended up changing their high school setting at some time during their high school years with more moving from comprehensive high schools into smaller options high schools.

The relationship with their teachers was very important to the students and their sense of engagement with the school. Many mentioned the value of smaller

class sizes which helped them form positive relationship with their teachers.

Finally, the flexible schedule of SOS that included late arrival and time dedicated

to service learning was identified as a positive for the students while they were in

middle school. A more complete summary and a discussion of the findings are

presented in the next chapter.

CHAPTER V

CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS

Introduction

While the previous chapter presented the findings of this study in detail, this

last chapter summarizes and discusses those findings as well as offers conclusions,

implications, and recommendations for educational leaders. To provide context, I

briefly review the problem and the methodology used to study it.

Statement of the Problem

For many, early adolescence is the beginning of a downward spiral (Jackson

& Davis, 2000). Such a spiral during middle school can lead to dropping out of

school. This study was designed to investigate what the voices of students say

about the impact of their experience in a mid-level alternative educational pathway

(Swingshift Options School). This study focused on the school factors that

influence student performance from the perspective of these students. It was

designed to examine the fundamental assumption that alternative educational

pathways must be developed for middle school students who are at-risk for not

achieving success in the mainstream classes to help them reduce their chance of

dropping out. It also focused on the importance of the transition from middle to

high school for these students at-risk for dropping out of school.

Review of the Methodology

The voices and experiences of former Swingshift Options School students were sought through both interviews and surveys to explore this assumption. This study used an instrumental case study approach that employs a case study format to help understand something other than only the particular case or related cases (Stake, 1995). In this study, the focus on the students and their experiences in the SOS program and their transition into their high school years helped us learn more about what these students felt they needed to be successful in school and in making the transition from middle to high school.

The study relied chiefly on information gained from 12 student surveys and follow-up interviews with nine of those surveyed students. Five of the interviewed students were female and four were male. Limited archival records (e.g., final high school grade point averages) were also used.

Conclusions

It is important to listen to the students who recently completed the transition from middle school to high school if educators are to understand more accurately the challenges of this transition and learn ways to improve and prepare this pathway for students. During this study the students did have much to tell educators, and they stressed the importance of the following:

- Positive relationships with teachers, counselors, and peers

- Beneficial SOS scheduling and service learning

- Small class size

- Need for improved transition to high school

- Comprehensive high schools often overwhelming for 9th graders

In general, the conclusions of this study affirm the results of other educational researchers. Each of the bulleted items are discussed more fully below.

Discussion of the Results

So after all is said and done, what does this study mean? Putting it all together is a challenging venture. This section presents some of the researcher's insights about the findings and explores the relationship of this study to previous research. Additionally, this section includes recommendations for educators and suggestions for additional research.

Interpretation of the Findings

Concerning my first conclusion, the relationship with their teachers, counselors, and peers was very important to the students and their sense of engagement with the school. Students consistently reported that relationships with teachers, counselors, and peers were meaningful to them from middle school and throughout high school. They felt comfortable asking questions in class and felt valued as a person. The students stressed the power of the teacher and student relationship while in SOS.

The relationship with the teachers was more meaningful than those with counselors when these students were in high school. This finding may reflect the role of the high school counselors. While in the SOS program, counselors were more consistently involved in the classroom with the students than would be the case in high school. High school counselors often have much larger case loads that curtail their availability to students. Students do not know their counselors as well as they did while in SOS.

As was mentioned in the previous chapter, students definitely had their favorite teachers. They liked some teachers more than others. The participants liked the teachers with whom they had meaningful relationships, that is with teachers who treated them with respect, seemed personally interested in them, and made them feel capable. In the third and fourth years of high school, students indicated stronger support from teachers and counselors in helping them meet their goals. As students progressed up through the grades, the relationships with peers became stronger while their relationships with teachers and counselors remained more static.

Concerning my second conclusion, the students identified the schedule of the SOS program as a positive factor for the students in middle school. The later school start time of the SOS program seemed to work well for these students. However, this later start time may have also made the transition to the much earlier high school schedule more difficult. While in SOS, the students began their day at

approximately 11:00 AM. In high school, the day began at approximately 7:30 AM. This in itself was most likely a difficult transition for these students.

The SOS schedule and curriculum allowed for regular participation in service learning activities. Students said they liked the service learning projects they did while in the SOS program because they provided real life experiences. This positive experience did not extend into high school where they made few references to formal service learning. Even when reflecting back to their middle school experience, however, the students interviewed did not remember any correlation between their service learning opportunities and their curriculum even though teachers were striving to integrate these.

My third conclusion is that class size matters. During the interviews students commented that during SOS, the small classroom size made it feel more like a family where everyone knew everyone. The intimacy of the small class allowed for more interactions with peers and teachers; however, if a student had an issue with someone, the small class size made it more difficult to handle because of the intense contact. One student commented that the smaller class sizes worked better for the teachers since they seemed less stressed. The issues of class size and even school size had a major impact on the transition of students from middle to high school.

The fourth conclusion is that the transition from middle school to high school needs to be improved (Mizelle and Irvin, 2000; Smith, 2007). The students

in this study experienced difficulty in transitioning to high school from the SOS middle school program. The SOS program involved a small class size which met in a separate area of the school with limited access to other students in the middle school. As students transitioned into high school, the size of their classes and the size of the high school itself was intimidating.

The former SOS students scattered to three or four different high schools. Not only were they transitioning into a larger learning community, but they also had very few of their middle school friends with them. The students who enrolled in comprehensive high schools went from an SOS classroom of approximately 15 students to a school of approximately 2,000 students.

During their last year in the SOS program at middle school, students received inconsistent information about the high school choices that were available to them. Their decisions about where to attend were often based upon peer choices and parental preferences. Although students heard presentations about these high school options while in middle school, the high schools presented their information in different ways. In fact, there is a sense that the high schools actually compete for students. For this reason, the information presented to students is somewhat slanted to the positive. For example, one high school brought a team of high school students to meet with the middle school students. These students were involved in leadership roles at their high school and were very personally engaging. This was a draw for some students.

Only three students initially chose a smaller alternative high school in the ninth grade, while six enrolled in comprehensive high schools. By the time of the student interviews, this proportion had reversed. Three more students had migrated from comprehensive high schools to a smaller alternative high school option, resulting in only three remaining students in comprehensive high schools. As mentioned in the previous chapter, these three students seem to have struggled the most during their high school years.

All of the factors mentioned above combined to make ninth grade hard for all the focal students. During the first year of high school, only 17% of the students surveyed indicated that they felt academically prepared to a large extent for high school. Perhaps the most important reason why ninth grade was difficult goes back to the lack of thorough information about what high school choices were available to the students. This information was also not thoroughly presented to their parents either.

Finally, the large comprehensive high schools were often overwhelming for the students who had participated in the SOS program. It seems that the size of the school mattered, too. There was a migration from comprehensive high schools to smaller options high schools. Students' reasons for making this move varied. One student just stated that she was just not meant for mainstream classes. Another wanted to go to an options high school straight from middle school, but his parents didn't agree with that choice. He moved immediately following his 18th birthday

when he could legally make the change himself. At this time he had realized that he would need to repeat his senior year in order to graduate, and he decided to move hoping this would help him graduate. The third student struggled in the comprehensive high school and together with his parents support made the decision to transfer to a smaller options high school where they believed he would have more structure.

Although not a conclusion, the remarkable resiliency displayed by the students who were interviewed was impressive. Almost all of these students struggled to get through school, yet they kept at it. Two may never graduate, although they were still attending at the time of their interviews. Several dropped out for various reasons and then returned. In chapter 4 we heard the students tell their stories. Several had prolonged their high school years in order to graduate. Interestingly, only one student started at the same school from which she was graduated in a four-year time frame. She had a very rocky start, but she persevered. What gave these students so much determination? Perhaps this is a topic for future exploration.

Relationship of the Current Study to Previous Research

The conclusions reached in this study are consistent with other educational research. Adolescence is a time when biology meets head-on the emotional and educational demands of school. The students in this study confirmed through their very personal stories the challenge of this developmental time. Many were caught

in a web of situations that caused them to get behind in school work and which,

therefore, caused them to lose confidence in their academic ability. The unique

developmental period that students experience during their middle school years was

stressed in chapter 2 by Portner (2000) and Solodow (1999).

The importance of positive relationships between students and their teachers

cannot be stressed enough. This relationship is sometimes influenced by

perceptions of early adolescents by teachers and counselors. For example, Mizell

(2002) echoed some of the thoughts expressed by the students in this study. He

expresses his thoughts very directly.

> Unfortunately, many adults fail to recognize the strengths of young
> adolescents and to capitalize on them. Instead, they focus on the sometimes
> erratic behaviors and risk-taking of middle school students, and spend
> disproportionate energy and time trying to straight-jacket the symptoms of
> this normal developmental period. Other adults appear to take a more
> benign approach, but if you listen carefully to their supposedly light-hearted
> references to young adolescents as being "wacky" or victims of "raging
> hormones" -- or even, as one leader of the middle school movement put it,
> -- "a little brain-dead" -- you hear pejorative characterizations that translate
> into low expectations. These adults regard young adolescents as not only
> out of control but disabled. (p. 28)

Students are very intuitive, and they often feel that underlying message of

disability from teachers. When asked what he wanted the people reading this paper

to know, one student said to tell them we're a lot smarter than they think we are.

Fortunately, students can also feel the strength that comes from supportive mentors

who build on the talents of the students.

Bridgeland et al. (2006) researched the reasons students are dropping out of school. They report that the leading causes for dropping out include feeling unchallenged, unmotivated, bored, and unsupported. There are also additional causes such as needing a job, becoming a parent, or having to take care of a sick family member that come into play when a student drops out.

Better professional development for teachers, real world learning opportunities (e.g., service learning), smaller classes where relationships can be developed were qualities that emerged as critical in this dissertation study as well. More than 70% of the students surveyed by Bridgeland et al. (2006) thought that better teachers, real world learning opportunities, and smaller classes would help students stay in school. The relationships piece voiced by the students in my study was also echoed by the students in the Bridgeland et al. research. Fewer than half of the students they surveyed knew a teacher or counselor with whom they felt comfortable discussing their personal problems. Finally, one of their students said that there just was not anyone at school to keep him there.

The schedule of the SOS program factored in time for students to become actively involved in service learning. Students indicated the value they gained from their service learning opportunities in SOS as a real life experience as well as the vast importance of the relationships with their teachers with whom they could relate. Service learning allows time for relationships to build between students and teachers. The work of Jackson and Davis (2000) is also consistent with the

information gathered in this study. They emphasized that teachers for the middle grades should be specifically prepared to teach young adolescents and that schools should be partners with various kinds of community organizations in educating young adolescents, including involving them in the experience of carefully considered service learning.

In my study, the students from the SOS program talked about the transition struggles they had with the larger settings, the increase in number of students, and the earlier schedule that the high school presented. These student-identified issues promote the need for greatly improved and seamless transition from middle to high school, particularly if the student has been in an options program at the middle level.

In this regard, the Tapping Our Potential Success program (TOPS) reported by Matthews and Swan (1999) also gives us guidance to compare with the findings of this study. The TOPS program tied middle school intervention directly in with a high school program entitled Project Success. The middle school program had many of the same features as the SOS program, but in addition it had a formalized transition into a high school program for its students. Interestingly, one of their findings was that students who experienced one year of regular education at the middle school level before entering high school had greater academic success in high school. Matthews and Swan attribute this finding to the acquisition of skills

necessary for the transition and successful completion of course work in a classroom where extra supports are absent.

The transition from middle school to high school was addressed to some degree in the TOPS program. Smith (2007) and Mizelle and Irvin (2000) stressed the need for addressing this vital bridge for students. Issues they highlight also mirror the concerns of the students in this study such as school size, social structures, academic concerns.

As also reported in chapter 2, Dynarski and Gleason (2002) examined four middle school programs which took an intensive approach to serving students at-risk for failure. They found that when compared with control group students, students in these four alternative schools were half as likely to drop out and completed an average of half a grade more of school. This supports the importance of early identification and action for students identified as at-risk for dropping out. The SOS program attempted to provide this for the identified students.

The students in my study were identified in middle school for being at-risk for dropping out. The importance of positive relationships with teachers, counselors, and peers has been previously discussed. Of additional importance, however, is the size of the learning community as it relates to the ability for students to know and be known. Smaller classes and smaller schools make a difference in the students' ability to form those relationships with teachers, counselors, and peers.

In responding to the growing concern over dropouts, the Bill and Melinda

Gates Foundation (2006) has begun to study what high schools might look like in

the new millennium. The Foundation specifically looked into reformatting large

comprehensive high schools into smaller, more personal schools generally no more

than 400 students. In its webpage report, *High Schools for the New Millennium*, the

Foundation looked at school size.

> Intuitively, it makes sense that smaller, more personalized schools are better
> positioned to serve students, and recent research confirms it. Small schools
> have been shown to increase graduation and college-going rates, improve
> attendance, bolster teacher morale and effectiveness, and reduce incidents
> of violence. (p. 6)

This report went on to explain that smaller schools make it possible for the

relationship between teachers, counselors, parents, and students allows for greater

and more efficient collaboration to benefit the student. Furthermore, the report

stated:

> In general, small schools foster an environment in which teachers know
> their students' emotional, academic, and social needs, as well as their
> strengths and weaknesses, and use this knowledge to tailor instruction.
> Students in turn feel recognized and cared for by their teachers and
> counselors. Students feel comfortable and confident enough to ask for help,
> admit errors, take risks, and experience failure while they learn. (p. 8)

Research into the value of small schools was also explored elsewhere.

Student voices in Philadelphia were captured through a project of Research for

Action (Crosby, George, Hatch, Robinson, & Thomas, 2006). Student researchers,

with guidance from Research for Action staff, examined adult-student relationships

in their new small high schools. The students attended Kensington High School

which was divided into three small schools which students could select to attend. Despite the smaller school environment, students still reported both successes and failures in building strong communication and relationships with their teachers. A smaller school does not guarantee good adult-student relationships although it may help.

Students also made this observation about their SOS teachers. Even though the SOS class size was small, some teachers were more effective in building relationships with the students than others. Again, this speaks to the need for specialized professional development for teachers who work with students at-risk of dropping out of school.

Mizell (2002) also stressed the value of quality staff development in producing successful students in middle school. He said, "We now know that what improves classroom practice and school leadership is tailored, intensive, sustained staff development that includes follow-up support, practice, feedback, and evaluation" (p. 209). Tailoring staff development for teachers who work with students at-risk of dropping out of school is indicated by this research study as well.

Recommendations for Educational Leaders

There are recommendations for both educational policy and practice that will be helpful to students at-risk of dropping out of school. Changes in policy are followed by changes in practice and sometimes the opposite is true. For example, it is suggested below that early interventions for students at-risk of dropping out

should be established. This policy then influences professional development of teachers, schedules, and much more. At other times, successful teacher practices prove to be a guiding force in the development of broader policies. Awareness of the relationship between policy and practice is, therefore, important to remember when making the following recommendations for educational leaders:

First, more emphasis should be placed on developing earlier interventions for students who can be identified as at-risk of dropping out of school. This is one policy change that should be instituted by educational leaders. Although the SOS process may not have been ideal, it did identify students who were struggling in school even though they had the ability to succeed. As the concern for the high school dropout rate continues to grow, steps need to be taken to identify these students earlier and develop a sustained system of support for them from the point of intervention through graduation.

Identification and early intervention can be difficult and requires more than a review of test scores. The professional evaluation of students by teachers and counselors must not be overlooked, as well as the cultural and economic setting of the student. Ideally, a team of educators should work together to gather descriptive information about each student and develop a criteria for selection in intervention activities. At Five Oaks Middle School, we developed the "at-risk formula" which guided our decisions. Each school community, however, is encouraged to develop its own process which best serves their students.

Second, there are implications for a need to improve the practice of professional development for teachers as a result of this study. Kanpol and Yeo (1990) pointed to the absence of professional development for teachers about listening and understanding student voice. In their research, they talked about inner-city students, but their thinking applies as well to all students who each bring their unique background to the classroom.

> Simply put, there are not "techniques" or "prescriptions" to both listen and understand a student "voice." Student voice refers to the cultural grammar and background knowledge that individuals use to interpret their experience. Each individual voice is shaped by its owner's particular cultural history and prior experience; it is the means by which students make themselves heard as active participants in their world. (p. 84)

Learning to listen in an open and unbiased way is not an easy skill. Teachers who develop the patience to listen in this open way cultivate an attitude of respect and value to their students.

Providing additional psychological and counseling background for teachers who work with students at-risk of dropping out will not only give the educators more understanding of the emotional needs of their students, but will also help them clarify any personal issues they have themselves that might cloud their effectiveness in the classroom. For example, Conrath (1985) stated that when working with potential dropouts, adults should see discipline and responsibility as things to be taught to students, not as things that automatically can be expected of them. He added, "At the same time, these adults understand the difference between teaching discipline and imposing obedience -- and the ramifications if the two get confused in the classroom" (p. 15). It can be frustrating for teachers who work with students who, at times, can be difficult, and simple things like tone of voice can

communicate that frustration. When students become confrontational, psychologically well prepared teachers can handle it and stay the course day after day.

Specific counseling strategies for conflict resolution should be highlighted in any staff development for teachers who will be working with students at-risk of dropping out of school. My recommendation would further encourage teachers to engage in some level of personal counseling. Improving their individual self-knowledge will help them maintain a balance within themselves while dealing with the often challenging young adolescents' lack of balance.

Research has taught us much about the developmental process young adolescents experience. A final recommendation for professional development would be for teachers to regularly revisit the current research about adolescent development. The experience veteran teachers have is to be valued, but their experience will also be enriched by being informed through knowledge of current research.

Third, the transition between middle and high school needs to be seamless for students who are at-risk of dropping out of school. Although this study focuses on the middle school to high school transition, this is a K-12 policy issue that must be addressed by school leaders. Collaboration between middle and high school buildings/personnel is critical (Mizelle, 1999). One specific recommendation for the middle to high school transition is to develop partner mentorships between a middle school teacher and a high school teacher. This would be one way of

providing a continuous lifeline for these students. The student could meet with his

or her team of mentors before leaving middle school. Regularly scheduled meetings

with this team during the first year of high school would be essential. Of course,

this model could take on different forms dependent upon the school context. For

example, a middle school teacher might co-mentor a small group of students with a

high school teacher.

Careful monitoring of student attendance and academic performance could

be done on a weekly basis by the high school mentor and shared with the middle

school mentor. Intervention could be put in place much more quickly by this team

with whom the student has a personal relationship. Too many students thought they

were ready and were surprised by how quickly they slid back into poor study

habits. Once a student is behind in school, he or she may begin to define

themselves as unsuccessful. This self-definition is a reflection of the feedback they

feel they get from other students and some teachers who become frustrated with

them. Again, time for professional development for teachers is essential. High

school teachers, for example, should be reminded about the developmental needs of

early adolescents.

Additionally, student partnerships could be formed. An eighth grade student

could meet with a ninth grade student to discuss what high school is like. This

could help dispel some of the concerns and misconceptions of the middle school

student. This partnership should start early in the eighth grade year and continue

through emails, meetings, etc., throughout the year. It would be helpful to look for appropriate matches between the middle school and high school students. The high school students who often visit the middle schools are the leaders at the high school. Middle school students at-risk of dropping out may not find much in common with these students.

Although only a few specific examples of transition activities have been presented, a diverse program of articulation activities should be developed through collaboration between middle and high school administrators, teachers, and counselors. Parents should also be heavily involved in these activities so that they also feel knowledgeable about the high school choices their students need to make and become comfortable with the new high school culture.

Again, each school community is unique and needs to develop their own menu of transition activities that provide meaningful transition activities for their incoming and departing students. Collaboration is a must when building a transition bridge for students at-risk of dropping out of school. It is strongly suggested that school communities develop a transition team with representatives from both middle and high school communities to organize the activities for these students. Administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, and students from each level should be involved in the planning.

Fourth, students need avenues into school and community activities. Too often in high school, students are eliminated from participation in school sports and

activities because of poor grades or lack of economic support. Even though schools often have scholarships available for needy students, in my experience, many students are hesitant to apply for these funds fearing embarrassment. SOS students reported positively about the advantages they experienced in their service learning opportunities. For many of them, the only extra activity in their life was school, so the importance of the relationships in the classroom and the learning that can come from real world experiences such as service learning takes on greater importance for these students. High schools could do much more to provide links to the community by developing more service learning opportunities for their students that support the curricular work at school.

One disadvantage of the small high schools is often the lack of opportunity for involvement in sports or music programs. These extra activities may be what keeps a student in school, because they are fertile places for relationships and friendships to thrive. In the Beaverton School District at the time the students in this study were making their transition to high school, they had to take a bus to a comprehensive high school to participate in sports programs. If they had wanted to play in a school band just for fun, they would not have had that opportunity unless they attended the very focused Arts and Communication High School.

The variable of the teacher's professionalism and personal skill in connecting with students is the vital issue, not the size of the school. Smaller high schools have advantages, but their small size also has limitations. For example,

they also have a smaller list of extra opportunities for students. As mentioned above, the student researchers in the Research for Action project indicated that a small-school environment does not always provide the strong teacher-student relationship that leads to success in school (Crosby et al., 2006).

In summarizing the recommendations for educators, let me reemphasize the importance of collaborative planning across school levels (K-12) and including all players (i.e., administrators, teachers, counselors, parents, students). Elements of planning which must be included to address the issue of school dropouts are (a) identification of students at-risk of dropping out, (b) development of in-depth staff development in counseling and psychology for professionals who work with the identified students, and (c) development of multifaceted transition plan for students as they move from one school level to the next. The sustainability of any planning should also be a focus of the collaborative work.

Suggestions for Additional Research

Perhaps it is human nature for one idea to lead to another. While conducting the research for this study, ideas emerged that are suggested below and may provide additional information that could support students at-risk of dropping out.

First, the value of the student voice is important. A student-led research project similar to the ground breaking research by the Kensington students (Crosby et al., 2006) could provide insight into the thoughts of the students while the students themselves are learning real life research protocols. Students talking with

students produces a different voice than students talking with adults. Student research skills could also be connected to the language arts curriculum.

The Kensington students conducted research over a two-and-a-half year period during which time they became knowledgeable about social science research methods (Crosby et al., 2006). They learned skills of participant-observation and taking field notes, and they kept reflective journals. Additionally, they learned to conduct focus groups and to conduct interviews. This type of student research could be a plus for both schools and students because it honors the voice of the students and develops their literacy and communication skills. Students could, for example, interview a sample of ninth grade students about specific issues of their transition from middle to high school. These issues could include curriculum continuity, social bridges, and involvement with the broader school community.

The need for unique professional development for teachers who work with students at-risk of dropping out has been identified. What would this experience look like? Is there anyone doing something in this area targeted at middle school students in particular? How integrated is our teacher preparation curriculum with the psychology departments in our colleges across the nation? There are many areas for future research in this arena. One example might be to integrate some component of school counselor/psychology professional coursework with the administrative licensure coursework. This would allow school administrators the

ability to increase their counseling skills which could then influence the teachers with whom they work.

The process for identifying and selecting students for participation in the Swingshift Options School was multifaceted. It looked at attendance, grades, economics, behavior, and ethnicity. Chapter 1 described the at-risk formula which weighed these various elements in more detail. One area for future research might ask whether our identification process (i.e., at-risk formula) places the right students in the SOS program? Conrath (1985) stressed the importance of placing the right students in the right program. If the needs of the students are too diverse, the focus for support may be diluted.

The transition from middle to high school was a consistent hurdle for most of the SOS students. This finding was consistent with the work of other researchers who also identified need for improving this vital transition (Mizelle and Irvin, 2000; Smith, 2007). The findings showed that by the time students had entered their junior and senior years in high school, they had established their rhythm and were feeling better about themselves at school. Focus on the transition from middle school into the early high school years should be more seamless for students. That difficult transition points to another area for future investigation - examining how students identified as at-risk for dropping out are followed during their transition from middle to high school. Where are the exemplary programs helping with the transition from middle to high school? At the time of this research there was little

information about intervention programs for middle school students who were struggling academically. Most interventions focused on students with behavioral issues, and very few focused on the transition from middle to high school and the importance of early intervention. Smith (2007) reported, "There is a lack of research on the impact of transition on students/families, and/or the potential of programs to assist student in the seamless transition from middle school to high school" (p. 87).

Finally, what about that unknown quality of student resiliency that appeared in the student participants in this study? How do educational leaders help identify and nurture this quality? How do mid-level teacher education programs facilitate teacher candidates' learning about and actively using that knowledge in the teaching of early adolescents?

Reflections as a Researcher and Educational Leader

While doing this research, I worried that students would hold back their feelings during the interview process since I had been their middle school principal. Of course, it is hard to really know the answer to this question, but their straightforward answers lead me to believe they did not hold back. In fact, they seemed grateful for the opportunity to release some of their feelings about their school experiences. They appreciated the fact that their opinions mattered and that what they said might help other students in the future. They talked openly about the

structure of the SOS program and the importance of the relationships with peers and teachers. Of interest, however, is what they did not talk about - the curriculum.

The information gained from this research is significant and unique because of the students who agreed to participate. They had years of school experience behind them at the time of their interviews and surveys including their transition from middle to high school. Their experience gave them a background which provided them insight into what worked and what did not during their school years and particularly during their transition from middle school to high school. No information of this type is available in current research.

If I could change things about the SOS students' experiences, I would help define the transition they experienced into high school much more aggressively. Based on this study, better optional programs for students at-risk of dropping out of school need to be developed for high school students - particularly during their 9th and 10th grade years while mandatory school attendance is still a factor.

As I worked with the data from the surveys and the interviews over many months, I found myself dissecting isolated bits of information. The longer I worked this way, the more I was drawn to the picture that was being drawn in my mind of each individual student, whether it was Tina who never liked coming to school, struggled with her academics, and acknowledged herself as a lesbian during her high school years, or Janet who struggled with school and basic confidence issues

until she decided to change herself and along with her father enrolled in a rock climbing class which she feels helped her change.

Finally, as I close this dissertation, I want to fulfill a promise I made to my interview participants. Because students' perspectives and voices were made intentionally prominent in this study, I am offering them the "final word." At the end of the interviews, I asked the following questions: Are there things about the SOS program or anything else that you want people to know about that I have not asked you about, things that would help kids who are like you were in middle school? If you could write a paragraph in my book, what would you write? Here is what a few of them had to say:

> Most definitely, if you're in middle school and you're having a hard time with middle school, try an alternative school first before you go to a traditional school. I'd say that's the best because I've noticed a lot of kids that went to SOS that went to an alternative school had no trouble getting into the alternative high school, like me and JT did. Because me and JT had a hard time at regular high school and that was kind of "sucky." It was no fun because we just went straight back to how we were in middle school before we got into SOS and that was really stressful. (Steven)

> Teachers sometimes will kind of think of students as sometimes being less intelligent than they are. And students really, kids altogether have great brain power, they can think on their feet; they know what they're doing. You just have to give them more instructions, more information on where to go. (Luke)

> Not everyone is meant for mainstream. Some kids may be brilliant in their future but have trouble in mainstream, that's okay. Like me. I'm like some, people keep saying I'm a brilliant artist, brilliant writer. I wasn't meant for mainstreaming. That's okay. So everyone is not meant for mainstream. (Megan)

Sometimes even the most difficult and quiet kids are just waiting for someone to discover them and to help them find what they're good at. It doesn't take much to just take someone aside to see what possibilities might be there. (Janet)

I would have to say don't judge kids these days. Don't judge them because if they had like a bad history of doing things . . . like give them a chance, I'd say. Give society, the youth society itself a chance to understand everything. I mean, don't sit there and put them down if you found out that you're going to class . . . smoked pot. Don't sit there and look at them like they're a stoner. Don't sit there and judge them. Give them a chance. I mean, people make mistakes and I just say, you know, don't look at high schoolers as immature teenagers. There are some teenagers out there that are very mature and [have a] very positive attitude. And if you want to go somewhere in life, [it's just that] people aren't giving us a chance to sit there and speak out about what we want to do. (Tina)

Each student has a story. We learned about Chris's story at the beginning of this study, and thoughts of him and the life he could have had loom in my memory. The students that I had the privilege of interviewing were willing and anxious to share their stories with us because they hoped that by telling their stories they might help other students who were like them. I wonder if we cannot find a better way to shepherd students from middle school to high school in a way that lets teachers hand over the story of each child to a selected mentor in high school as in a relay race, as each participant carefully passes the baton from one to another. If any participant drops the baton, they lose the race. Are not our students just as important?

As a former middle school principal, I have been touched by the complexities and hardships that too many of our children face in their lives. Although I do not know Kathleen who wrote the closing poem below, I feel as if I do. I hope that the students who shared their wisdom about their journey through

SOS and high school will turn and smile - knowing that their contribution may help other students begin theirs.

Push me! See how far I go!
Work me, 'til I drop. Then pick me up.
Open a door, and then make me run to it before it closes.
Teach me so that I might learn.
Then let me enter the tunnel of experience alone.

And when, near the end,
I turn to see you beginning another's journey,
I shall smile.

-- Kathleen, 14 year-old student

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APPENDIX A

BEAVERTON SCHOOL DISTRICT RESEARCH

APPROVAL DOCUMENT

Lewis & Clark WebMail

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INBOX: Your research has been approved
5 of 115)

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   Date: Fri, 17 Sep 2004 17:02:48 -0700
   From: Suzanne Riles <Suzanne_Riles@beavton.k12.or.us>
     To: csmith@lclark.edu
Subject: Your research has been approved

Hi Carol,

Congratulations, at last the Assessment Committee has met and approved
your going ahead with your follow-up study of the Options students.
Please give me a call so that we can coordinate the best way to notify
principals of schools where you think students may be. This will allow me
to contact them directly to let them know that the District approves their
going ahead with the research.

Suzanne Riles, Ph.D.
Research and Evaluation, Dept. of Information and Technology
Beaverton School District, Beaverton, Oregon   97006
(503) 591-4109;   fax (503) 591-4306

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APPENDIX B

PARENTAL CONSENT LETTER

Dear Parent/Guardian:

Your child is invited to participate in a research study I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation at Portland State University. The purpose of this study is to explore how participation in the Swingshift Options program at Five Oaks Middle School impacted the students both academically and socially as they made their transition from middle school to high school. Your child was selected for this study because he/she was a student in the SOS program or the Options program at Five Oaks.

As you may remember, I served as principal at Five Oaks Middle School from 1998 to 2002. Now I teach at Lewis & Clark College. My interest in the challenges that face many of our middle school students is still very important to me. Very little research has included the opinions and the voices of students who participated in programs similar to SOS and Options, and I believe we need to hear what these students have to say. I would appreciate your support of your student's participation in this study.

A Parental Consent Form is included with this letter along with a Student Consent Form, which your child needs to also sign. Both forms need to be signed and returned to school within two school days. If the forms are received in a timely manner, your child will be given a brief survey to complete by the school counselor. The survey will be completed at a time that will not conflict with school classes. For example, they could complete the survey before or after school, during lunch, or during a homeroom or study hall period. It is expected that it will take approximately 15 minutes to complete the survey.

Some students will be invited for an interview so that we can learn more in-depth information about their experiences in middle school and in high school. If your child is selected for an interview, the interview will also be conducted at school at a time that does not conflict with classes. The interviews will be audio taped and transcribed by a graduate student not associated with the research, and the transcriptions will only be analyzed/reviewed by my dissertation advisor, Dr. Karen Noordhoff, and me. All information will be confidential. The interviews are expected to take approximately 45 minutes.

Your child will receive movie passes as a thank you for returning the Consent Forms whether or not he/she has chosen to participate in the study. Students who participate in interviews will receive additional movie passes as a thank you.

My relationship with the students as their former school principal may influence the way students respond to participation in this study and in ways they may feel they should or should not respond to questions. I will hope to reduce this problem by acknowledging this relationship with the students and by stressing the importance of their

sincere response to questions so that the experiences they have had can help inform opportunities for other students in the future.

Thank you for your consideration. It is my sincere hope that this research study will help us discover additional ways we can help students be successful in their school life. If you have any questions or concerns, please contact me at 503-768-6087 or the Office of Research and Sponsored Projects at Portland State University at 503-725-4288.

Sincerely,

Carol Smith

Parent/Guardian Consent Form

Student Name: _____

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the above information and agree for your child to take part in this study. Please understand that you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty, and that, by signing, you are not waiving any legal rights.

_____ My child may complete the survey.

_____ My child may be interviewed if selected.

_____   _____
        Parent/guardian signature   Date

Please ask your child to return this form along with the Student Consent Form to the school counselor within two school days. A copy of this signed Consent Form will be returned to you.

APPENDIX C

STUDENT CONSENT LETTER

You are invited to participate in a research study I am conducting for my doctoral dissertation at Portland State University. The purpose of this study is to explore how participation in the Swingshift Options program at Five Oaks Middle School impacted the students in that program both academically and socially as they made their transition from middle school to high school. You have been selected for this study because were a student in the SOS program or the Options program when you attended Five Oaks.

As you may remember, I served as principal at Five Oaks Middle School from 1998 to 2002. Now I teach at Lewis & Clark College. My interest in the challenges that face many of our middle school students is still very important to me. Very little research has included the opinions and the voices of students who participated in programs similar to SOS, and I believe we need to hear what you and other students have to say. I hope you will consider participating in this study.

Both you and your parents/guardians will need to sign a consent form in order for you to be allowed to participate. Both forms are included with this information and they both need to be signed and returned to school within two school days. If the forms are received by your school counselor in this timely manner, you will be given a brief survey to complete by the school counselor. It should take you approximately 15 minutes to complete the survey. As a thank you for returning the consent forms, you will receive movie passes as a thank you whether or not you decide to participate in this study.

Some students will be invited for an interview so that we can learn more in-depth information about their experiences in middle school and in high school. If you are selected, I will conduct the interview at school at a time that does not interfere with your classes. The interview will be audio taped so that your answers can be accurately notated. The interview will take approximately 45 minutes. Your name and personal information will remain confidential. Any reference to your comments will be assigned a fake name to protect your identity. If you are selected for an interview, you will receive additional movie passes.

Thank you for your consideration. It is my sincere hope that this research study will help us discover additional ways we can help students be successful in their school life.

Sincerely,

Carol Smith

Student Consent Form

Student Name: _____

School: _____

Grade: _____

Your signature below indicates that you have read and understand the above information and agree for your student to take part in this study. Please understand that you may withdraw your consent at any time without penalty, and that, by signing, you are not waiving any legal rights.

_____ I agree to complete the survey.

_____ If selected, I agree to be interviewed.

_____   _____
      Student's signature   Date

Please return this form along with the Parent/Guardian Consent Form to your school counselor within two school days.

Counselor's Name: _____

APPENDIX D

STUDENT PARTICIPANT INFORMATION AT

TIME OF STUDY

Student	High School	Grade	Survey	Interview	Cum GPA
Luke	Options	12	yes	4/21/2005	2.69
Trevor	Comprehensive	10	yes	5/31/2005	0.792
Matt	Options	12	yes	12/08/05	2.8
Mitchell	Comprehensive	11	yes		0.89
Megan	Options	12	yes	12/05/05	2.4
Janet	Options	G	yes	12/04/05	2.8
Kate	Comprehensive	G	yes	2/03/06	2.75
Will	Dropout	10	yes		0
John		G	yes	2/01/06	1.8
Tina	Comprehensive	12	yes	12//16/06	.70
Nick	Options	12	yes		2.4
Sean	Options	12	yes	1/06/06	1.17

APPENDIX E

SURVEY DOCUMENT

Swingshift/Options School (SOS) Alternative Educational Pathway Survey

When you were a student at Five Oaks Middle School you were in a Swingshift/Options Program. I am interested in learning about you and your experience in that program and what it is like being in high school. I am also interested in learning how it felt when you moved on to high school from Five Oaks.

I am going to take all of the information from your survey and the surveys completed by other students and write a report for Portland State University where I am going to school. All of the information in the survey is anonymous and confidential. Your survey has a number that only I know. I will not use your name in my report. I will not share any of your personal information in the survey with anyone in your high school. It is my hope that by learning about your experiences, we will be able to help more students like you be successful and happy in school. Thank you for your help.

Carol Smith

Swingshift/Options School (SOS) Alternative Educational Pathway Survey
Spring 2005

Please circle the grade you are in this year: 9   10   11   12

I. DURING THE SOS/OPTIONS PROGRAM

Directions: Please think back to when you were in the SOS/Options Program and to the classes and activities you participated in and to the teachers and counselors you had. Using the scale—"Not at All", "To a Small Extent", "To a Moderate Extent", "To a Large Extent"—please rate each statement about your experience.

Scale: 1= Not at All **2**= To a Small Extent   **3**= To a Moderate Extent   **4**= To a Large Extent

TO WHAT EXTENT DID YOU EXPERIENCE EACH OF THE FOLLOWING WHEN YOU WERE IN SOS/OPTIONS?	CIRCLE ONLY ONE RATING FOR EACH QUESTION			
A. Teacher and Counselors				
1. Your teachers cared about you as a person.	1	2	3	4
2. You could talk with your teachers about any problems you were having in school or out of school.	1	2	3	4
3. Your teachers were fair.	1	2	3	4
4. Your teachers helped you see connections between what you were studying and your own experiences.	1	2	3	4
5. You could talk with counselors about anything that was bothering you.	1	2	3	4
6. Your teachers helped you set goals that you could reach.	1	2	3	4
7. Your teachers made learning fun and interesting.	1	2	3	4
8. Your teachers encouraged you to share your ideas and supported what you had to say.	1	2	3	4
9 Your teachers and counselors helped you achieve your goals.	1	2	3	4
B. Classes and School				
10. You liked coming to school each day.	1	2	3	4
11. The off-campus service projects you did made you feel good about yourself.	1	2	3	4
12. You liked being involved in a variety of school activities such as sports, music, and assisting with special education students.	1	2	3	4
13. You had a good relationship with the students in your classes.	1	2	3	4
14. You liked being involved in service activities in the community such as animal shelters and senior citizen centers.	1	2	3	4

I. DURING THE SOS/OPTIONS PROGRAM

Scale: 1= Not at All 2= To a Small Extent 3= To a Moderate Extent 4= To a Large Extent

TO WHAT EXTENT DID YOU EXPERIENCE EACH OF THE FOLLOWING WHEN YOU WERE IN SOS?	CIRCLE ONLY ONE RATING FOR EACH QUESTION			
15. You felt smart and able to do everything that was expected of you when you were at school.	1	2	3	4
16. Being able to come to school later in the morning made it easier for you to get enough sleep and feel ready to go to classes.	1	2	3	4
17. Learning was easier because you could use a computer to help you with your reading, writing, and math.	1	2	3	4

C. Your Parents/Guardians

18. Your parent(s)/guardian(s) encouraged you and were there for you when you needed them.	1	2	3	4
19. Your parent(s)/guardian(s) were interested in what you were learning and asked you questions about school.	1	2	3	4
20. Your parent(s)/guardian(s) were interested in what you were learning and asked you questions about school.	1	2	3	4

D. Getting Ready For High School

21. Your teachers and counselors gave you information about high school programs and courses that helped you get ready for high school.	1	2	3	4
22. Your visits to high school s helped prepare you for what to expect in high school.	1	2	3	4
23. Your meetings with high school counselors helped prepare you for high school.	1	2	3	4
24. Your teachers and counselors in SOS helped prepare you for high school by supporting and encouraging you to take new challenges.	1	2	3	4
25. You felt ready to go on to high school at the end of 8th grade.	1	2	3	4

II. YOUR FIRST YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL (WHEN YOU WERE A FRESHMAN)

Name of High School:

Directions: Please think back to when you were in your first year of high school and to the classes and activities you participated in and to the teachers and counselors you had. Using the scale—"Not at All", "To a Small Extent", "To a Moderate Extent", "To a Large Extent"—please rate each statement about your experience.

Scale: 1= Not at All 2= To a Small Extent 3= To a Moderate Extent 4= To a Large Extent

TO WHAT EXTENT DID YOU EXPERIENCE EACH OF THE FOLLOWING DURING YOUR <u>FIRST YEAR IN HIGH SCHOOL?</u>	CIRCLE ONLY <u>ONE</u> RATING FOR EACH QUESTION			
26. You felt well prepared academically when you started high school.	1	2	3	4
27. You had supportive teachers and counselors who cared about how you were doing and helped you adjust to high school.	1	2	3	4
28. You were able to make friends with other students in your classes.	1	2	3.	4
29. You knew how to become involved in activities and hook up with other students who had interests like yours.	1	2	3	4
30. You felt good about yourself when you were in school.	1	2	3	4
31. You liked coming to school each day.	1	2	3	4

PLEASE COMPLETE EACH OF THE FOLLOWING SECTIONS FOR EACH YEAR YOU HAVE BEEN IN HIGH SCHOOL AFTER YOUR FRESHMAN YEAR.

III. YOUR <u>SECOND YEAR</u> OF HIGH SCHOOL

Name of High School:

Directions: Please think about your <u>second year of high school</u> and to the classes and activities you have been in and to the teachers and counselors you have had. Using the scale—"Not at All", "To a Small Extent", "To a Moderate Extent", "To a Large Extent"—please rate each statement about your experience.

Scale: 1= Not at All 2= To a Small Extent 3= To a Moderate Extent 4= To a Large Extent

TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED EACH OF THE FOLLOWING IN YOUR <u>SECOND YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL?</u>	CIRCLE ONLY <u>ONE</u> RATING FOR EACH QUESTION			
A. Teacher and Counselors				
32. Your teachers care about you as a person	1	2	3	4
33. You feel comfortable talking with your teachers about any problems you are having in school or out of school.	1	2	3	4
34. Your teachers help you see connections between what you are studying and your own experiences.	1	2	3	4

Scale: 1= Not at All 2= To a Small Extent 3= To a Moderate Extent 4= To a Large Extent

TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED EACH OF THE FOLLOWING IN YOUR <u>SECOND YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL?</u>	CIRCLE ONLY <u>ONE</u> RATING FOR EACH QUESTION			
35. Your teachers are fair.	1	2	3	4
36. Your teachers help you set goals that you can reach.	1	2	3	4
37. You can talk with counselors about anything that is bothering you.	1	2	3	4
38. Your teachers make learning fun and interesting.	1	2	3	4
39. Your teachers encourage you to share your ideas and support what you have to say.	1	2	3	4
40. Your teachers and counselors help you achieve your goals.	1	2	3	4

B. Classes and School

41. You like coming to school each day.	1	2	3	4
42. You are involved in school and/or community service activities.	1	2	3	4
43. You have made friends with the students in your classes.	1	2	3	4
44. You feel good about yourself when you are at school.	1	2	3	4

C. Your Parents/Guardians

45. Your parent(s)/guardian(s) encourage you and are there for you when you need them.	1	2	3	4
46. Your parent(s)/guardian(s) are interested in what you are learning and ask you questions about school.	1	2	3	4
47. Your parent(s)/guardian(s) attend activities you are involved in during and/or after school.	1	2	3	4

IV. YOUR <u>THIRD YEAR</u> OF HIGH SCHOOL

Name of High School:

Directions: Please think about your <u>second year of high school</u> and to the classes and activities you have been in and to the teachers and counselors you have had. Using the scale—"Not at All", "To a Small Extent", "To a Moderate Extent", "To a Large Extent"—please rate each statement about your experience.

Scale: 1= Not at All **2**= To a Small Extent **3**= To a Moderate Extent **4**= To a Large Extent

TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED EACH OF THE FOLLOWING IN YOUR <u>THIRD YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL?</u>	CIRCLE ONLY <u>ONE</u> RATING FOR EACH QUESTION

A. Teacher and Counselors

48.	Your teachers care about you as a person	1	2	3	4
49.	You feel comfortable talking with your teachers about any problems you are having in school or out of school.	1	2	3	4
50.	Your teachers help you see connections between what you are studying and your own experiences.	1	2	3	4
51.	Your teachers are fair.	1	2	3	4
52.	Your teachers help you set goals that you can reach.	1	2	3	4
53.	You can talk with counselors about anything that is bothering you.	1	2	3	4
54.	Your teachers make learning fun and interesting.	1	2	3	4
55.	Your teachers encourage you to share your ideas and support what you have to say.	1	2	3	4
56.	Your teachers and counselors help you achieve your goals.	1	2	3	4

B. Classes and School

57.	You like coming to school each day.	1	2	3	4
58.	You are involved in school and/or community service activities.	1	2	3	4
59.	You have made friends with the students in your classes.	1	2	3	4
60.	You feel good about yourself when you are at school.	1	2	3	4

C. Your Parents/Guardians

61.	Your parent(s)/guardian(s) encourage you and are there for you when you need them.	1	2	3	4
62.	Your parent(s)/guardian(s) are interested in what you are learning and ask you questions about school.	1	2	3	4
63.	Your parent(s)/guardian(s) attend activities you are involved in during and/or after school.	1	2	3	4

V. YOUR FOURTH YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL

Name of High School:

Directions: Please think about your <u>fourth year of high school</u> and to the classes and activities you have been in and to the teachers and counselors you have had. Using the scale—"Not at All", "To a Small Extent", "To a Moderate Extent", "To a Large Extent"—please rate each statement about your experience.

Scale: 1= Not at All 2= To a Small Extent 3= To a Moderate Extent 4= To a Large Extent

TO WHAT EXTENT HAVE YOU EXPERIENCED EACH OF THE FOLLOWING IN YOUR <u>FOURTH YEAR OF HIGH SCHOOL?</u>	CIRCLE ONLY <u>ONE</u> RATING FOR EACH QUESTION			

A. Teacher and Counselors				
64.	Your teachers care about you as a person	1	2	3	4
65.	You feel comfortable talking with your teachers about any problems you are having in school or out of school.	1	2	3	4
66.	Your teachers help you see connections between what you are studying and your own experiences.	1	2	3	4
67.	Your teachers are fair.	1	2	3	4
68.	Your teachers help you set goals that you can reach.	1	2	3	4
69.	You can talk with counselors about anything that is bothering you.	1	2	3	4
70.	Your teachers make learning fun and interesting.	1	2	3	4
71.	Your teachers encourage you to share your ideas and support what you have to say.	1	2	3	4
72.	Your teachers and counselors help you achieve your goals.	1	2	3	4

B. Classes and School				
73.	You like coming to school each day.	1	2	3	4
74.	You are involved in school and/or community service activities.	1	2	3	4
75.	You have made friends with the students in your classes.	1	2	3	4
76.	You feel good about yourself when you are at school.	1	2	3	4

C. Your Parents/Guardians				
77.	Your parent(s)/guardian(s) encourage you and are there for you when you need them.	1	2	3	4
78.	Your parent(s)/guardian(s) are interested in what you are learning and ask you questions about school.	1	2	3	4
79.	Your parent(s)/guardian(s) attend activities you are involved in during and/or after school.	1	2	3	4

Thank you for completing the Swingshift/Options School Alternative Educational Pathway Survey.

The information you provided is anonymous and confidential and will be combined with the ratings of other former SOS students prior to use by Carol Smith for her dissertation research. Portland State University's Human Subjects Review Committee and Carol Smith's dissertation committee have approved this survey.

If you are not currently attending high school, please place a checkmark by one of the reasons below.

____   Graduated

____   GED

____   Withdrew/Dropped Out

____   Other (please explain)

What year did you last attend high school? _____

What high school did you last attend> _____

APPENDIX F

INTERVIEW GUIDE

Interviewee No. _____

Swingshift/Options School (SOS) Alternative Educational Pathway Interview Guide

High School: _____

Grade: _____

Introductory Comments:

When you were a student at Five Oaks Middle School you were in a Swingshift/Options Program. I am interested in learning about you and your experience in that program and what it is like being in high school. I am also interested in learning how it felt when you transitioned to high school from Five Oaks. I am going to take all of the information from your interview and the interviews I have with other students and write a report for Portland State University where I am going to school. All of the information in this interview will be anonymous and confidential. My notes for your interview will have a number that only I know. I will not use your name in my report. I will not share any of your personal information in the interview with anyone in your high school. It is my hope that by learning about your experiences, we will be able to help more students like you be successful and happy in school. Thank you for your help.

Permission to tape conversation:

I would like to tape record our conversation. It will help me while we talk because I might have difficulty writing down exactly what you are telling me and I want to make sure I remember all of our conversation. The only people who will listen to the tape are the person who is going to transcribe it and she lives in CA and me. I will not share anything you say to me with your high school teachers. Will it be okay for me to tape record our conversation? Thank you.

Do you have any questions before we begin?

Questions:

I. First I would like to talk about what it was like to be in the SOS/Options Program.

a. Can you remember why you decided to be in the SOS/Options program?

b. What stands out the most from being in the program? Probe: activities, classes, teachers, counselors, students, interviewee.

Activities: what kinds of activities were you involved in; what did you like/not like about them; what did you learn from the activities

Classes: what do you remember about the classes you took; what did you like/not like about them; do you feel like you learned a lot/a little in the classes; were the classes like other classes that were not part of the SOS program; how were they the same or different; how about the schedule—coming to school later in the morning and staying later in the afternoon

Teachers: what do you remember about the teachers in the SOS program; how did they teach the classes you were in; were they helpful/not helpful; was there anything different about the teachers or the way they taught in SOS compared with other teachers that were not part of SOS

Counselors: what do you remember about the counselors in the SOS program; did they help you in anyway

Students: did you become friends with the students in the SOS program; what kinds of things did you do together

Interviewee: did you like being in SOS; do you remember if being in SOS changed how you felt about school (how); would you recommend SOS/Options to middle school students (why)

c. When you were in SOS/Options you learned about different high school programs and classes and you visited a high school and talked with high school students, teachers, and counselors. What do you remember about those activities? Probe: SOS teacher/counselor preparation, high school visitation, talking with high school teachers, counselors, students

SOS teachers/counselors: what stands out most from talking with your SOS/Options teachers and counselors about high school (different high school programs, classes, the kinds of things high school teachers expect in high school, activities you could be involved in, e.g., sports, music, alternative high school programs)

High school visitation: what stands out most from visiting a high school while you were in the SOS/Options program (classes, programs, teachers, counselors, students, activities)

Talking with high school teachers, counselors, students: what stands out most from talking with high school teachers, counselors, students when you visited a high school (classes, programs, activities)

d. Do you remember if you felt ready to go to high school at the end of middle school? Probe: SOS experience, decision about which high school to attend

SOS/Options experience: what things in SOS do you feel helped you the most to get ready for high school

Decision about high school to attend: how did you decide what high school to go to (location, friends, parents/guardians, specific high school program), did you go to that high school

2. Now that we've talked about your experience in the SOS/Options program I would like to talk about what it's like to be in high school.

a. Did you go to the high school you planned to go to right after middle school (if not, why different high school)

b. Thinking back to when you first started high school, was it like what you expected it to be from what you learned in the SOS/Options program? Probe: similarities, differences from first expectations

c. Did you feel like you were ready for high school when you first started? Probe: things from SOS/Options that made you feel ready, surprises, things that were easy/hard during the first year of high school, things you wish you had known about high school before you started

d. What were your teachers like during your first year? Probe: favorite teachers (why-personality, teaching style, hard/easy requirements), least favorite teachers (why-personality, teaching style, hard/easy requirements), being able to go to teachers if having difficulty or do not understand something

e. What were your classes like that first year? Probe: how did you decide to take the classes you took, did someone help you decide which classes to take, can you remember your favorite classes, least favorite classes (what were they; why favorite/least favorite); hard vs. easy

f. Who did you hang out with during the first year of high school? Probe: SOS friends, new friends

g. Did you play any sports or join any clubs, or do any after school activities during your first year

h. How are things going since that first year? What are your teachers like? Probe: favorite teachers (why-personality, teaching style, hard/easy requirements), least favorite teachers (why-personality, teaching style, hard/easy requirements), being able to go to teachers if having difficulty or do not understand something

i. What are your classes like? Probe: how did you decide to take the classes you are taking, did someone help you decide which classes to take, favorite classes (why), least favorite classes (why)

j. Are you playing any sports? How about any other activities such as clubs or music, are you in any activities during school or after school?

k. Are the friends you have in high school the ones from middle school, SOS program? Have you made new friends? Do you hang out with these friends during and after school? What kinds of things do you do together?

l. How would you describe yourself as a student? Do you go to all of your classes (if no, why), are there things about the high school that make you want to come to school everyday or skip school? Do you come to school everyday, skip school very often (if so, why)? Do you complete all of your schoolwork?

m. Overall, what are the best things about this high school, teachers, classes, activities, other students? How about the worst things?

n. In thinking back to the SOS/Options program, are there particular things that were in SOS/Options program that you wish were at this high school (what, why)?

o. What would you make different about this high school if you could?

3. Are there any things about the SOS/Options program or about this high school that we haven't talked about that you would like to share?

Thank you very much for talking with me. I learned a lot from our conversation.

APPENDIX G

RELATIONSHIP AMONG RESEARCH QUESTIONS AND

DATA SOURCES

Relationship Among Research Question, Sub Questions and Data Sources

	Research and Sub Questions	Survey Questions	Interview Questions*	Documents
2.	What impact did participation in SOS have on students' experiences in middle school?			
	a. Were students involved in school and community activities that were personally meaningful to them?	#12: You liked being involved in a variety of school activities such as sports, music, and assisting with special education students; #14: You liked being involved in service activities in the community such as animal shelters and senior citizen centers.	#1b: What stands out the most from being in the program?	
	b. Were students involved in relationships with their teachers, counselors, and peers that were personally meaningful to them?	#1: Your teachers cared about you as a person; #2: You could talk with your teachers about any problems you were having in school or out of school; #4: Your teachers helped you see connections between what you were studying and your own experiences; #5: You could talk with counselors about anything that was bothering you; #6: Your teachers helped you set goals that you could reach; #8: Your teachers encouraged you to share your ideas and supported what you had to say; #9: Your teachers and counselors helped you achieve your goals; #13: You had a good relationship with the students in your classes	#1b: What stands out the most from being in the program?	

*: See Interview protocol for specific probes

	Research and Sub Questions		Survey Questions	Interview Questions*	Documents
2.	What impact did participation in SOS have on students' experiences in middle school?				
	c.	Did students learn strategies to help them develop and meet goals?	#6: Your teachers helped you set goals that you could reach; #9: Your teachers and counselors helped you achieve your goals	#1b: What stands out the most from being in the program?	
	d.	Did students feel good about school and themselves?	#10: You liked coming to school each day; #13: You had a good relationship with the students in your classes; #15: You felt smart and able to do everything that was expected of you when you were at school; #16: Being able to come to school later in the morning made it easier for you to get enough sleep and feel ready to go to classes; #17: Learning was easier because you could use a computer to help you with your reading, writing, and math #18: Your parent(s)/guardian(s) encouraged you and were there for you when you needed them; #19: Your parent(s)/guardian(s) were interested in what you were learning and asked you questions about school; #20: Your parent(s)/guardian(s) were interested in what you were learning and asked you questions about school	#1b: What stands out the most from being in the program?	

*: See Interview protocol for specific probes

Research and Sub Questions			Survey Questions	Interview Questions*	Documents
2.		What impact did participation in SOS have on students' experiences in middle school?			
	e.	Did students feel prepared to go on to high school?	#21: Your teachers and counselors gave you information about high school programs and courses that helped you get ready for high school; #22: Your visits to high school s helped prepare you for what to expect in high school; #23: Your meetings with high school counselors helped prepare you for high school; #24: Your teachers and counselors in SOS helped prepare you for high school by supporting and encouraging you to take new challenges; #25: You felt ready to go on to high school at the end of 8th grade	#1c: When you were in SOS/Options you learned about different high school programs and classes and you visited a high school and talked with high school students, teachers, and counselors. What do you remember about t hose activities? #1d: Do you remember if you felt ready to go to high school at the end of middle school?	

*: See Interview protocol for specific probes

Research and Sub Questions			Survey Questions	Interview Questions*	Documents
3.	Did former SOS students feel prepared for high school?				
	a.	Did students feel prepared for their first year of high school?	#26: You felt well prepared academically when you started high school; #27: You had supportive teachers and counselors who cared about how you were doing and helped you adjust to high school; #28: You were able to make friends with other students in your classes; #29: You knew how to become involved in activities and hook up with other students who had interests like yours; #30: You felt good about yourself when you were in school	#2b: Thinking back to when you first started high school, was it like what you expected it to be from what you learned in the SOS/Options program? #2c: Did you feel like you were ready for high school when you first started? #2d: What were your teachers like during your first year? #2g: Did you play any sports or join any clubs, or do any after school activities during your first year?	

*: See Interview protocol for specific probes

	Research and Sub Questions	Survey Questions	Interview Questions*	Documents
4	Are former SOS students actively engaged in and connected to high school?			
	a. Are students able to form relationships with their teachers, counselors, and peers that are personally meaningful?	#37: You can talk with counselors about anything that is bothering you; #39: Your teachers encourage you to share your ideas and support what you have to say #40: Your teachers and counselors help you achieve your goals #43: You have made friends with the students in your classes	#2h: Since your first year how are things going? What are your teachers like? #2k: Are the friends you have in high school the ones from middle school, SOS program? Have you made new friends?	
	b. Are students who are more engaged in high school experiencing higher self-esteem than students who are less engaged?	#41: You like coming to school each day; #42: You are involved in school and/or community service activities #44: You feel good about yourself when you are at school; #46: Your parent(s)/guardian(s) are interested in what you are learning and ask you questions about school; #47: Your parent(s)/guardian(s) attend activities you are involved in during and/or after school	#2l: How would you describe yourself as a student?	Academic achievement records (GPAs)

Research and Sub Questions			Survey Questions	Interview Questions*	Documents
4.	Are former SOS students actively engaged in and connected to high school?				
	c.	Are students who are more engaged in high school doing better academically than students who are less engaged?	#41: You like coming to school each day; #42: You are involved in school and/or community service activities #44: You feel good about yourself when you are at school; #45: Your parent(s)/guardian(s) encourage you and are there for you when you need them #46: Your parent(s)/guardian(s) are interested in what you are learning and ask you questions about school; #47: Your parent(s)/guardian(s) attend activities you are involved in during and/or after school		Academic achievement records (GPAs)
	d.	What features of the SOS program do students feel had the greatest impact on their transition to and their remaining in high school?		#2n: In thinking back to the SOS/Options program, are there particular things that were in SOS/Options program that are present in your high school that you like; how about things that you wish were at this high school?	
	e.	What activities from the SOS experience are helping students feel successful in school?		#2n: In thinking back to the SOS/Options program, are there particular things that were in SOS/Options program that are present in your high school that you like; how about things that you wish were at this high school?	

5.		What conditions need to be present for students to remain in high school?			
	a.	How important are relationships that students form with teachers, counselors, and peers in keeping students in school?		#2m: Overall, what are the best things about this high school, teachers, classes, activities, other students? How about the worst things?	
	b.	How important is parent/guardian involvement in students' lives in keeping students in school?		#2m: Overall, what are the best things about this high school, teachers, classes, activities, other students? How about the worst things?	
	c.	How important is student involvement in during and after school activities and programs in keeping students in school?		#2m: Overall, what are the best things about this high school, teachers, classes, activities, other students? How about the worst things?	
	d.	What makes students feel connected to high school?		#2m: Overall, what are the best things about this high school, teachers, classes, activities, other students? How about the worst things?	

*: See Interview protocol for specific probes