DISCOVERING STUDENTS' PERCEPTIONS OF WHAT CONTRIBUTES TO THEIR SUCCESS AT A CONTINUATION HIGH SCHOOL

by

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ABSTRACT

Purpose of Study:
The intent of this research project is to gain a clear understanding, from the students' point of view, of what aspects of the continuation high school program contribute to the success of students who were unsuccessful at a traditional high school and at risk of not graduating.

Procedure:
The qualitative study examines 15 students from various backgrounds who increased their attendance rates, raised their grades, decreased their discipline infractions, and became successful in school since leaving the traditional high school and enrolling in the continuation high school. Students were interviewed individually, and eight were selected to be part of two focus groups to answer questions regarding their thoughts on why they were able to do better at the continuation site. Data was then reviewed and analyzed to identify common contributing factors to student success.

Findings:
The results of the interviews and focus group demonstrate that students, regardless of background, have similar beliefs in what contributes to their success. Themes identified in this study suggest that students have a stronger connection to the continuation site because of the "family environment," active assignments, smaller class sizes, strong relationships with staff and faculty, no homework, structured environment, high expectations, and additional ways to regain credit. Continuation schools provide students an opportunity to be themselves, feel respected and gain a sense of belonging.

Conclusions:
Students at this continuation school seem to have a generally positive view of their current education. Findings from the focus groups and individual interviews show that students made connections to their increased academics and the small learning environment that incorporated active learning.
Conclusions cont.

Student input is a necessity for school reform. If a school wants to create a system where the students take "ownership" of the school community, it must listen to the students inside. Interviewing students should occur annually in order to allow students to feel valued, and the focus should be on student learning.

Chair: 

______________________________
Signature

MA Program: Education
Sonoma State University

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Chapter 1: Overview

Introduction

This qualitative study examines students' perceptions of what contributes to their success at a continuation high school. Continuation schools serve students sixteen years of age and older who have not graduated from high school, are at risk of not graduating, and are exempt from compulsory school attendance (CDE-Continuation Education, 2010). The intent of this research project is to gain a clear understanding, from the students' point of view, why students are able to find more success at a continuation school than at a traditional high school. The primary research question that guides this study is: What are students' perceptions of what contributes to their success at a continuation school?

Success is defined by students and measured through such ideas as: increased attendance, increased performance/achievement, and/or active classroom engagement.

This study examines 15 students from various backgrounds attending a continuation high school in a public school district in an economically affluent county in Northern California.

Many of the students included in the study, as stated by them through initial admission intake interviews, felt “dismissed” by their teachers at their traditional comprehensive high school. Self-esteem was often lacking, and they held defeatist attitudes due to their poor academic history. For various reasons, the continuation high school in this study offered this small group of students a new perspective on learning, and encouraged them to exceed their own educational
expectations and goals. The factors contributing to this sense of possibilities for students will be explored and identified in this study. They are such factors as a small learning environment, family atmosphere, and teacher-student relationships.

The author and researcher is also currently serving as the assistant principal of the school in this study.

Background

On Thursday, August 23, 2007, I stood waiting in the hallway at 7:30 a.m. on the continuation school’s campus (school of study), anticipating the students’ arrival. I was nervous, yet excited wondering what the year or even the first day with the students would bring. It was my first day as an administrator, and I could only speculate how the students would behave and how the returning students would react to the many changes I had implemented, both in the way of policies and physical conditions in the school.

Starting in May 2007, upon my selection as assistant principal (lead site administrator\(^1\)), I began to visit the campus to meet with my predecessor. From the moment I arrived at the campus, I was completely appalled at the chaos that I discovered. Students were roaming the campus halls, using profanity as though it were acceptable; their feet were up on the tables; and the hallway looked liked a storage room filled with junk, papers, and supplies. Inside classrooms, students were sitting on tabletops and desks, listening to music on their headphones, or were outside playing basketball without supervision – instead of in their classes.

\(^1\) Officially, my title is Assistant Principal. However, I serve as the only administrator on site. Therefore, throughout the study I will use the term lead site administrator to refer to my role as this is how the faculty and students view the position.
learning math, English, science, social studies, health, and other subjects required for graduation. The hall and classrooms had old, dirty, moldy blue carpet. The walls were chipped and the paint was peeling off. There was a soda machine, filled with soda and other sugary drinks, placed inside the hallway doors, blocking the entrance. A broken copy machine, broken bookshelves, a couch and other office supplies were kept in the middle of the hallway. The classroom desks, at least 15 years old, were broken, covered in graffiti (tagged), and unsafe. The students had limited seating in the outside lunch area; there were only two (severely tagged) picnic tables located next to a 12’ fenced area that was a dumping ground for an assortment of broken office and classroom furniture. Upon talking to the staff, I learned that student attendance was poor and most students missed at least two days a week. My initial perception of the campus was that it resembled a holding facility, not a school setting. The campus itself was not conducive to student learning. It was at that moment that I knew I had my work “cut out for me.”

Upon taking on my assignment as lead site administrator, the first thing I did during the summer prior to my first official day with students was to renovate the campus with the little funding the school received. New tile flooring was installed, replacing the moldy carpet. Hallways and classrooms were cleaned and painted. Due to the time constraints and overbooked custodial staff, there was not enough time to power-wash the outside building and paint the bathrooms. I borrowed a power-washer to clean the building myself in order to ensure it was noticeably clean for the first day of school, and I painted the inside of the bathrooms to give them a
cleaner look. The discarded area for broken furniture was removed, and the fencing was taken down, and new picnic tables were ordered, which provided a real lunch area for the students. The soda machine was taken outside and placed in the new lunch area and flavored waters replaced the sugary drinks and soda. The hallway became a gallery, where student work is now displayed, and tables were pushed against the walls to allow additional workspace for the students. A small office room was emptied to make room for the copy machine and fax machine; cabinets and shelving were added to provide room for storage; a total of 12 new computers for staff and students were purchased, as well as a new copy machine, and new tables and chairs. With every change it began to feel more like a school.

As the physical changes occurred and I cleaned some of the school myself, I received comments from maintenance employees such as: “I hope you don’t get disappointed. You’re doing all this work and they won’t even appreciate it,” or “I don’t know why you’re doing all of this. It’s just going to look the same in a few days.” I explained my theories regarding the importance of students respecting their school and taking pride in their learning environment, and in their education. How could I expect the students to feel important when they were walking into an obvious “dumping ground”? I believe students deserve the feeling of pride when walking into a clean campus, conducive to learning. Thus, as a new administrator, I made it become a reality. Three years later, much to the maintenance teams’ surprise, the campus remains clean.

Eggers and O’Leary (1995) discuss a theory written by Wilson and Kelling regarding broken windows. Wilson and Kelling argue that if even a small disorder
in a community is left uncorrected, chaos will reign. "If a window in a building is broken and left un-repaired," they wrote, "...all the rest of the windows will soon be broken. One un-repaired window is a signal that no one cares, so breaking more windows costs nothing...Untended property becomes fair game for people out for fun or plunder" (p. 74). This study analyzed 30 neighborhoods and found that the level of crime was based on the level of disorder greater than factors such as income level, resident turnover or racial makeup. I theorized that had I allowed the campus to continue as it was, the chaos would have remained where instruction now prevails.

However, the work did not stop here. What was seen on the surface was only the beginning. There were many policy changes that needed to take place, along with the students' and some of the staff's belief system regarding education at a continuation school. And so my journey of creating a new school culture began to take place.

The school that I focus on in this study is a continuation school for students who, for a variety of reasons, have been unsuccessful in the traditional high school. The county where the school is located is a relatively affluent one in the San Francisco Bay Area. All students who enter the school are deficient in credits and are at risk of not graduating with their class. For confidentiality purposes the school referred to in this study will be called Oaks High School.

Oaks High School currently has a cap of 65 students for enrollment, due to the maximum capacity of the school building. As a result, there is a waiting list of students who are in need of an alternative school setting. Therefore, students are
selected carefully based upon their credit deficiency, behavior, attendance, and overall motivation to regain their credits and graduate from high school. The primary purpose of the school is to emphasize the importance of empowering these young people to take an active role in their own success in education. Before students are able to come to the school, they must come in with their parent(s) or guardian(s) for an intake interview with the lead site administrator and the academic counselor. During the interview each student is asked why the continuation school is a better fit than the current traditional high school site. They are also asked to think about three goals, listing why these goals are important; once they list their goals, we ask them how our school can help make these goals a reality.

The main goal that students have in common is they want to graduate from high school; they realize they have not put enough emphasis on obtaining a decent grade point average, and want an opportunity to redeem themselves in their education. The school handbook that students are given upon acceptance into the program outlines the following areas, in no particular order, that they are asked to work on while they attend the school:

1) Improve their academic skills
2) Regain lost credits from poor attendance or failing grades
3) Build a positive self-image
4) Establish goals for their future
5) Develop a positive attitude toward school and others
6) Develop acceptable patterns of attendance and promptness
7) Take responsibility for their own actions
8) Establish a healthy lifestyle (Oaks School Handbook, 2009)

The mission of the school, created by the staff and students, can be found in the staff and student handbooks (Oaks School Handbook, 2009). It states that the mission is: "To provide a small learning environment that fosters a collaborative culture, which focuses on credit recovery and academics to help build the bridge to post-secondary education" (p.2).

Oaks High School has been successful in meeting this mission with a large number of its students, which includes: a high graduation rate of 94% for all students; 100% of long-term students (attending 90 days or more), which is especially good for an alternative school; decreased discipline rates with fewer classroom referrals; and an increased attendance rate with 98% for 2008 and 99.8% for 2009. While most students find success, there is also a disturbingly low post-secondary education completion rate. Although the school has found success in increased graduation rates, it has not found a 100% success rate in attaining all eight of the goals, listed on page 6. For example, unfortunately, there is also an incarceration rate of 10.71% for the graduating class of 2008, and while it may not be high, even a few students are too many. Staff has noticed an upward trend that even the students who were highly motivated, had excellent attendance, and often the best performance in the classroom, (the three incarcerated graduates from the 2008 school year were all top performing students) have found themselves in trouble with the law. On more than one occasion the high-achieving students return to campus after graduating, requesting a letter of reference addressed to the courts to assist them in avoiding trouble with
the law. Others come back to visit and when asked what they’re doing, they have the same answer over and over again, “Nothing really, I’m looking for a job right now,” or “I went to the community college, but it was too hard. Maybe I’ll go back next semester.”

I find it frustrating that the students are not living up to their potential. My goal is to ensure that all students have a choice to go to college, are prepared for college. I also seek to ensure that when they graduate from Oaks High School, they have a clear plan of what they intend to do during the subsequent 12 months, including strategies to reach those goals.

While the school’s goal is to have all of the students pursue post-secondary education, it may not always match with the students’ goals. Students have their own reasons for wanting to enroll in a continuation school, but most students, before attending Oaks High School, have already decided what their goals are after high school graduation. Many of them at the intake interview write on their initial intake questionnaire form that one of their goals is attending a junior college, beauty school, a vocational school or the armed forces. While only a few students have aspired to work straight out of high school, the unfortunate current reality is that most of the graduates have joined the workforce and are working for minimum wage, frustrated with their own lack of progress.

As explained earlier, when I arrived three years ago at this very school, the majority of the student population seemed to be lackadaisical about their education. School was a hangout for most students, and credits were still earned despite the mediocre attendance rate of 87%. My first year as the administrator, I
immediately changed the attendance policy; if students were not at school, they could not earn credits. Initially, returning students from the previous year were indignant about the new attendance and credit policy. However, they quickly realized the consequences of their behavior. Hence, the attendance rate jumped from 87% to 98% that first year and increased to 99.8% the following year in 2009.

According to the California Department of Education, the purpose of a continuation school is to provide students, who are often credit-deficient, a flexible schedule due to employment, family obligations and/or other critical needs. The entire school population at Oaks High School consists of students who are at risk of not graduating because of their lack of required credits. They have all experienced challenges within the school system, and for one reason or another, lack the required 220 credits to graduate on time with their class.

Over the past two years the staff and I have worked diligently to restructure the way the school operates; where needed, we have implemented new procedures and policies with incentives or consequences.

All staff enforces the school policies, and students understand what is expected of them, and sign a school contract in order to remain a student at the school. They must:

1) Earn a minimum of 18 credits a quarter
2) Go to mandatory tutorial if they earn a C- or below in any class
3) Behave respectfully and appropriately
4) Attend school daily and for the entire school day
5) Take responsibility for their actions.

With these significant changes the staff and I have witnessed the students rise to the occasion and perform at a much higher level than ever before. However, we continue to be concerned about their success beyond their time at the school, which will be identified in the next section.

Purpose of Study

During the 2009-2010 school year, my third as lead site administrator, there has been a significant shift in the focus of the school’s program. Emphasis is being placed on academic preparation for post-secondary education, and on raising academic expectations in all classes rather than focusing only on graduating from high school. Students seem to be more invested in their education, which has resulted in fewer behavioral issues.

Implementing the many changes and watching the school move from barely functional to functioning in a much more positive and productive manner was very encouraging, and it became evident that, it was time to move it into the next stage and provide a school system that reaches ALL of the students and provides them with the best education possible. The list below identifies several areas the staff is currently considering addressing:

1) Increasing the active learning of all students
2) Continuing to reduce students’ use of profanity
3) Improving academic rigor to challenge the more advanced learners
4) Increasing more interventions for the lower level learners
5) Developing rubrics for all assignments

These are all areas that the staff has identified and is considering. However, most importantly, student input is needed to create a system in which they can take ownership. A truly successful school provides not only a safe academic environment, but listens to the students within the campus walls. The youth of today have a voice and educators are recognizing the power of listening to students (Sanacore, 2008). I envision a school where students feel a sense of pride to be a part of the school system because they helped create it.

In the 2009-2010 school year there was a new message for the students from the staff. Staff not only helped students receive their high school diplomas, but encouraged all of the students to continue their education at a junior college. This was a change from the previous year's goal of focusing solely on a high school diploma and being prepared for the "real world." The entire school district, with the help of educator Jeff King, transitioned into a new belief and practice. King is a school administrator who has made it his life's goal to support all students in their learning. King was an elementary school principal for eleven years and with the support of his staff, students, and parents created a community where students, some of the poorest students in the community, went from merely functional to outperforming their more affluent neighborhood schools. King was a hired consultant to work with the school district to develop what he and coauthor, Lopez (2008), call an educational revolutionary experience: No Excuses College Prep (NECP), which Oaks High School is now a part of. NECP at Oaks High School focuses on the importance of being a life-long learner and
places a strong emphasis on academics, character, and individual contribution to the community and world. The staff collectively agreed that the responsibility of the school is to create systems that make this dream for all students a reality. All students will be academically prepared for college, but not all of them will choose it. Going to college or any post-secondary institution will be up to the individual student, but as their educators, it is our job to ensure that all of them have the option to go if they so choose by academically preparing them for college courses. There are “No Excuses” for student failure; this pertains to both students and staff.

With the new message the appearance of the school changed by posting signs around the campus with positive messages. The signage is meant to be a reminder to staff to always provide quality instruction using a multitude of strategies to reach all learners. The signage is also meant to be a reminder for students to stay focused on what they are learning and what is being discussed or presented in class. Examples of these signs are: Building Bridges to College, Freedom through Responsibilities, and No Excuses College Prep at Oaks High School.

Teachers strive to be consistent and enforce school rules and school Board policies that were developed to ensure a safe academic learning environment. Each class, created its own set of class rules. Students are expected to SLANT, an acronym for Sit-up, Lean forward, Ask questions, Nod, and Track the speaker or teacher (Ellis, 1989). According to a study at the University of Kansas, the SLANT strategy is useful to use with all students, but it works especially well for
students with ADD or ADHD. Simply stating the word SLANT allows the teacher to continue teaching the lesson and be able to regain the students’ attention without too much disruption (Shoopman, 2010). Students are also expected to take PRIDE, in their education, another acronym, used by Clovis Fire Department (Clovis Fire Department, 2009) Positive Results In Daily Effort. The hope is that these new messages bring higher expectations, student engagement and learning for the entire population — daily rewards in knowing they are improving their knowledge and bringing themselves one step closer to the goal of graduating from high school.

Oaks High School has a transient student population that fluctuates between 64-72 students throughout the year and consistently remains majority male. Currently, there are 50 male students and 16 female students, 16% of whom are Black, 36% Hispanic, and 48% White (CDE – A parent guide to SARC, 20102). These numbers are disproportionate to the two traditional high school sites in the school district. The average of the two main high school sites show that 65% of students are White, 23% of students are Hispanic, 4.5% of students are Black and 7.5% of students are Other or Not Specified (District Query, 2009).

The above listed statistics show that there is a significant problem and that the minority students are not finding success at the traditional high schools: earning poor grades, mostly D’s or F’s, their attendance rates are poor and truancies are numerous. Copious notes in their discipline files indicate behavioral issues, credit loss due to

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2 School Accountability Report Card (SARC) provides parents and the community with important information about each public school (CDE, 2010).
failed grades or poor attendance, and an overall lack of interest in school as observed by their academic counselors. Interventions made at the previous site are listed on the referral to Oaks High School. The two traditional high school sites are working toward implementing new programs, teaching methods, interventions and support to help these students find success in their schools. In the meantime, their academic counselor and/or probation officer refer these struggling students to Oaks High School. According to the ASAM\textsuperscript{3} report provided by the California Department of Education, the graduation rate at this school was 94.4\% in 2008 and 100\% in 2009. Therefore, one can conclude that students are finding success in the alternative education setting. However, a question does remain: is graduation the only determining factor to success? Finding out if the students believe that Oaks High School has helped them become successful learners, and if so, raises a question in need of exploration: What are students' perceptions on what contributes to their success in a continuation high school?

Sometimes educators, in their zeal to impart knowledge, impose their beliefs upon students, unconsciously dictating what students need to learn in order to succeed out in the world. The study question is built upon the following concept: utilizing students' perceptions and ideas in the reform of education is critical to its success. In order to do this, a forum will have to be created to identify their perceptions.

\textsuperscript{3} Alternative Schools Accountability Model (ASAM) provides school-level accountability for alternative schools serving highly mobile and highly at-risk students (CDE, 2009).
Listening to students can help create a learning environment that is all inclusive, which is far more empowering than an authoritative school system developed from the top down without student input. Newman (1992) describes student engagement occurring when “…students make a psychological investment in learning. They try hard to learn what school offers. They take pride not simply in earning the formal indicators of success (grades), but in understanding the material and incorporating or internalizing it in their lives” (p. 3). Eleanor Duckworth (1996) hypothesized that students come to understand curriculum by being placed in a situation where they develop that understanding, as opposed to being told what they should understand.

With this study I hoped to discover the answer to my research question, “What are students’ perceptions on what contributes to their success at a continuation high school?” By listening to the student voice, I hoped to gain a better understanding of how they learn and what they need. With this information I could then create policies, improve teaching strategies, and modify goals to better serve their needs. This includes discovering if the students take ownership in their education and what they believe contributes to their student success at a continuation school.

Research Methodology

This qualitative research study focused on 15 continuation high school students. Through student interviews, focus groups, and observations, I discovered students’ perspectives on why they were able to find increased levels
of success, and what they believed was the most effective way to learn and understand new information.

Individual interviews with 15 students were conducted in order to gather information. Students' perspective seems to be valued less or underrepresented in school reform. Cook Sather (2002) asserts,

> We as 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 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)

If the goal of education is to truly have students learn and be engaged in the learning that is taking place, then we need to build on what they are saying, not just what we think they need.

It was my intent to also find out how students felt about what I believe were necessary changes that had to be implemented in order to benefit all students and to provide an environment where students can learn.

**Limitations**

Due to the fact that I am the lead site administrator, I was both a participant and a researcher. Therefore, my role was one of a participant observer. A participant observer is a researcher who spends extended time with the group as an insider and tells members they are being studied (Johnson & Christensen, 2008, p. 595). I recognize that my position may have interfered with the validity of the data because students might have been somewhat apprehensive to share candid responses. All students were required to fill out and turn in a
parent-signed consent form that explained their participation in the study would not affect their status in the school.

Summary

Through interviews, focus group and literature reviews the intent of this study is to gain a clear understanding on how the students perceive academic success, and any connection they find to the school and their own success. This newly found knowledge would help to make necessary changes to the policies in order to continue to enhance the learning environment for all students to achieve.
Chapter Two: Literature Review

Educators’ main goal is to facilitate a learning experience for all students to gain knowledge in a particular subject matter, and yet rarely do we take the time to ask our students or listen to our students on what they believe will help them achieve this goal. One of the recent graduates of the continuation high school in this study states, “Being a teenager is hard. You have many of the same problems and responsibilities, but none of the power. It’s frustrating when you’re not heard.” School reform must include student input or it is useless, because any change strictly from the top down will eventually crumble. There must be a strong and solid foundation, built by everyone.

Fletcher (2005), founder of internationally recognized Freechild Project, working with schools and nonprofit organizations to promote effective engagement strategies, explains that meaningful student involvement is the development of engaging students as partners in all aspects of school change for the purpose of strengthening their commitment to education, community and democracy. Instead of allowing adults to manufacture “student voice” by inviting one student to a meeting, meaningful student involvement continuously acknowledges the diversity of students by validating and authorizing them to represent their own ideas, opinions, knowledge, and experiences throughout education in order to improve our schools. I believe this is what must be done in order to create a successful change and experience a true shift in culture.

Skinner and Belmont (1993) examined 144 children's behaviors in grades 3-5 across a school year and explain,
Students who are engaged in learning show sustained behavioral involvement in learning activities accompanied by a positive emotional tone. They select tasks at the border of their competencies, initiate action when given the opportunity and exert intense effort and concentration in the implementation of learning tasks; they show generally positive emotions during ongoing action, including enthusiasm, optimism, curiosity, and interest. (p. 572)

Student engagement is also increasingly used to describe meaningful student involvement throughout the learning environment, including students participating in curriculum design, classroom management, and school building climate (Fletcher, 2005). Student engagement is defined differently throughout the literature. There does not seem to be a consensus among students and educators as to how to define student engagement. Archambault, et al. (2009) administered questionnaires to 13,330 students from 69 high schools in the province of Quebec (Canada) for three consecutive years to study student behaviors and engagement. They defined student engagement by dividing it among three categories: behavioral engagement, the affective dimension, and the cognitive dimension. Behavioral engagement concerns student conformity to classroom and school rules (i.e. attendance and politeness). It also refers to student involvement in classroom work and discussions and in extracurricular activities. The affective dimension is defined by student feelings, attitudes, and perceptions toward school. It mainly addresses liking school, a sense of belonging, interests, and general enthusiasm for learning. Finally, the cognitive dimension concerns student psychological involvement in learning (i.e. perceptions of competency, willingness to engage in effortful learning, and task-
oriented goals) and use of self-regulation strategies (i.e. memorization, task planning, and supervision).

Phil Schlecty (1994), says students who are engaged exhibit three characteristics:

1) They are attracted to their work.

2) They persist in their work despite challenges and obstacles.

3) They take visible delight in accomplishing their work.

According to deCharms (1968), the experience of having little control over learning leads to a sense of alienation. He showed that teachers could utilize autonomy-supportive strategies in the classroom and that allowing students to set their own goals or choose their own projects demonstrates gains in motivation and achievement. Understanding how students perceive their school and education will provide valuable information for improving the educational process.

In the book, Conversations with America's Best Teachers, J. William Towne (2009) traveled around the United States and spoke to teachers throughout the country who had been honored with the National Teacher of the Year Award, having powerful conversations and discovering new ways to inspire students. One of the teachers is Ron Poplau, a 47-year community service veteran teacher for grades 11-12, who wasn't always successful in teaching discussed his views of learning to teach. After many failures, he:

...learned that the secret to success in the classroom was to focus on changing attitudes, as opposed to behaviors. He also mastered the art of storytelling, as nearly all of his lessons are taught through the use of fascinating real-life stories that are forever remembered. (p.189)
Poplau explains in the interview that,

...education to him is not how much you know, but the creation of an *attitude*. I got a speeding ticket two years ago on my way to school. I was going sixty-one in a forty. I knew what the speed limit was, and I had to pay $85 for that. So the point is that knowing something means very little without having the right attitude. If you create a good attitude in your classroom, the kids will come to school, and they will study and learn more than you would ever believe. (p. 193)

The literature supports the idea that if we do not create student ownership in their learning, then students' learning may be limited. In order to create student buy-in, we have to listen to their voices, hear what they need, and create a positive attitude toward education within the classroom. Poplau organizes his class to make his lessons meaningful and relevant to real life. He continues to explain that, "...students will pick and choose what they want to learn. Learning is an internalization process, not a memory game. Give the same exam two weeks later, and you'll get different results. Students want the learning to be fun and memorable" (p. 194).

Certo, Cauley, and Chafin (2003) conducted a study that explored students' levels of belonging and engagement in high school. They interviewed 33 students from seven comprehensive schools in Richmond, Virginia, gaining understanding of student perspectives around instruction, teachers, friends, and school activities. Their research documented "...a variety of instructional variables that influence belonging and engagement, making learning both fun and memorable, including the presence of authentic work." Marks (2000) found that
these variables can include asking students to solve new problems, answering interesting questions, applying learning to situations outside of school, discussion, and cooperative learning.

Battistich, Watson, Solomon, Schaps, and Solomon (1991) followed children across elementary schools and trained teachers in providing opportunities for children to develop a pro-social orientation toward their classmates and community. They maintain that classroom discussion, specifically where students have the opportunity to express personal opinions, gives them the opportunity to discover that others care.

In their interviews and observations of four teachers and fifty-one students from three urban high schools, Cothran and Ennis (2000) investigated urban high school teachers' and students' perspectives on student engagement and found that students' engagement levels were dependent upon teachers' actions. When talking with the students, they found that students believed engaging teachers communicated, cared, and enthusiastically provided opportunities for active learning; while the teachers indicated that the single greatest impediment to engagement was students' poor attitudes. Interestingly, the students stated that they would likely begin class with low motivation and would wait until the teacher provided a reason to become engaged. However, the teachers did not believe it was their job to motivate the students, but rather provide important information to receptive students. In order to successfully reach all students, teachers and staff alike must make the first step to make strong, positive connections with all students, regardless of their learning abilities.
Milner (2007), in his work with teachers and Black male students in urban schools, researched and found five central principles to what he considers next level education meaning creating an all inclusive classroom environment where all students thrive. These principles are:

- Teachers and students envision life beyond their present situations.
- Teachers and students come to know themselves in relation to others.
- Teachers and students speak possibility and not destruction.
- Teachers and students care and demonstrate care.
- Teachers and students change their thinking to change their actions. (p. 241)

If a student has never known or seen anything but mediocrity, it is probably going to be difficult for that student to envision a different path; he or she will probably settle for mediocrity.

It’s critical that every school across the country develop strategies to help all students learn the necessary material and come to the realization that all students cannot learn in an environment where conformity, isolation and testing take precedence. This literature identifies that teachers need to listen to their students, get to know their students, create lesson plans that stimulate their students’ brains and create excitement around learning, or the drop-out rate will continue to rise and the achievement gap will continue to expand.

In a study sampling 115 students Professor Marija Lebedina-Manzoni, Ph.D from the University of Zagreb, Roatia conducted a study to discover what factors students credit with their academic success or lack thereof. What she found was “...that the most important things for student success in studying are:
persistence, good lectures, conscience, a will to gain knowledge, and well organized” (p. 706). She elaborates by explaining that most of the factors relate to the importance of influence that is coming from within “i.e. personal characteristics of a student.” In this study, during the individual interview one of the questions asked students to tell about a time when s/he felt successful in or out of school. Many of them shared experiences out of school; it may have been CPR for a babysitting course, learning to play football, learning to dance or learning to fix a car. When asked why they chose to share this experience, all of them answered (in their own words) because it was important to them and because they were interested in it. When asked what they did to become successful, they all stated that they practiced until they were good at it. They were then asked how this could be applied to school. Most of the students shared that they could keep doing the work until they were good at it and understood the material/concepts.

In order to guarantee success, teachers must refuse to grant the students permission to fail (Ladson-Billings, 2002). Teachers who make the most profound and meaningful improvements in their knowledge and understanding of cultural and racial diversity “explored their personal histories and value systems; developed an understanding, respect, and value for other cultures; teachers practices were enhanced when they had empathetic dispositions” (Brown 2004, p. 327; Milner 2007, p. 242). Milner (2007) discovered a significant finding, which was that teachers empathized with their students and did not pity them. Teachers that are able to create a trusting relationship are teachers who believe in their students, not take pity upon them or speak negatively toward them. As
previously stated, Milner identifies the importance of speaking possibility, not destruction; much like self-fulfilling prophecy when a student is consistently told s/he are not good at something, eventually s/he will believe it’s true.

Haberman (2000) takes a closer look at urban schools in the United States and found that the terms we use control our perceptions, shape our understanding, and lead us to particular proposals for improvement. Therefore, if we believe in our students, it is crucial to continue to have high expectations of them. In order to instill the necessary confidence within students, educators must believe that all students are capable of success in their education. Educators must not accept excuses or use language that does not empower the students of today, but instead use terms that convey a belief system in all of the students, which in turn, shapes students’ beliefs within themselves. In chapter four you will read the importance around a teachers’ belief in his or her student and how their high expectations play a significant role in helping his or her student find success in the classroom.

Milner (2007) has made a connection between the notion of respect and teacher relationships. Black male students who feel respected by their teachers are able to build stronger relationships with their teachers. While this study was conducted with Black male students, it may have implications for all students. Teachers can be successful when they do not put their students down; they value all students’ perspectives and provide them space to have voice in the classroom (Milner, 2007). For example, one way that teachers can create space for all students’ voices is in the “Think, Pair, Share,” strategy. Rather than simply calling on students who raise their hands, he/she asks the class a question and has
all students think of an answer to themselves then students share their individual answers in pairs. Finally, the pairs of students are asked to share their answers with the class and are called on at random. This teaching technique encourages all students to participate, allowing even students who do not usually speak in the group setting an opportunity to gather their information and be readily prepared and willing to participate aloud and share with the entire class. By being inclusive the teacher validates the importance of student voice and respecting all students, not just the high achieving ones. Dr. Donna Beegle (2006) argues that developing a trusting relationship with students is key in creating a strong foundation. This strategy of ‘Think, Pair, Share” does open up space for students who may not typically speak in class. However, it also controls the topic of the conversation. My study seeks to create a more open forum for students to voice their views beyond class participation.

In his book, Kids in CHAOS, Ray Culberson (2007) explains that kids in chaos have an enhanced need for emotional connection with adults. By chaos he means kids who are at-risk students, on the verge of joining gangs or making the wrong choices. He suggests if educators share something personal about themselves that it helps to build a bridge (of connection) and develops a relationship. Building these relationships allows insight on how the students are progressing. Thus, teachers will be more in-tune with the students, and their emotional needs. This conscientious effort on behalf of the teacher builds trust with the student.
Dr. Martin Krovetz (1999) explains in his book, *Fostering Resiliency*, that schools which value and respect, and know their students are schools that are filled with staff that have a belief that all students are capable of learning and making sound choices. This is consistent with Culberson’s theory on kids needing connections. When teachers share something personal, they are beginning to tear down the wall and start building the necessary connections. Dr. Krovetz shares that students need a sense of belonging and places a huge emphasis on cooperative learning and the celebration of success. He concludes with the importance of school leaders spending quality time with staff and students alike. Oaks High School is striving to make this a reality. Students are celebrated for their achievements; it may be perfect attendance, improved behavior, academic success, increased CST scores, or credit completion. Students are recognized, honored and celebrated throughout the year. Celebrating students, recognizing them, and the importance of getting to know them is a primary reason for this study.

The purpose of alternative education is to provide a small learning environment for students who seek additional support (CDE - Continuation Education, 2010). Schools, such as the one in this study, strive to provide that small learning environment and support. We also seek to provide an opportunity for at-risk students to reinvent themselves, believe in themselves, graduate from high school, and pursue post-secondary education.

The review of literature shows that meaningful student involvement — which includes listening to student ideas, validating that student voice is
purposeful and that students are significant partners in learning, and reflecting on students’ ideas and thoughts — can help to create a meaningful school environment where students are engaged in the curriculum being taught. Building connections through personal experience and developing trust are also ways to help strengthen the learning environment.

The goal of this study was to solicit continuation school students’ opinions about instruction, teaching strategies, learning environment and structure. It was my intention, as researcher and lead site administrator, to allow students an opportunity to begin to explore what contributes to their success once they enroll in the continuation school. The literature cited in this study provides support for the important consideration of students’ views of their own learning. There is clearly a need for descriptive studies that focus specifically on students’ own perception of their school experience and their level of engagement in school. It is my hope that this study contributes in this way.
Chapter Three: Methodology

Overview of Methodology

The purpose of this study is to learn which factors—according to the students themselves—contribute to academic success at a continuation high school. The study took on features of an action research project in that it was focused on local solutions and was participatory, conducted by the site administrator (researcher) who works closely with the students each day.

Action research, according to Johnson and Christensen (2008) is described as focusing on:

... solving specific problems that local practitioners face in their school and communities. It views your classroom or other work environment as a place to conduct research. It is more participatory and it is conducted by teachers, administrators, counselors, coaches, and other educational professionals. (p. 12)

Participant-as-observer, as explained by Johnson and Christensen (2008) “spends a good deal of time in the field participating and observing” (p. 214).

They continue by sharing:

An advantage of this approach is that, for ethical reasons, the researcher can request permission to collect and record data as needed. In addition, the researcher can obtain feedback about his or her observations and tentative conclusions from the people in the research study. A weakness is that the participants might not behave naturally because they are aware that they are being observed. (p.214)

Since the researcher is also the lead site administrator, participant-as-observer is a significant role. As the site administrator, it is necessary to interact
with students on a daily basis, as well as gather necessary data to be used for the purpose of this study. This is beneficial. However, there is also awareness that this role may influence the quality of the data gathered.

With the many changes that have taken place at the continuation high school site over the past three years and the implementations of new policies and programs, students' voices had yet to be heard. Students' perceptions are perhaps the most significant factor, other than results, and without their sense of ownership the changes may be insignificant.

Data gathered included students' ideas and input on what contributes to their own success. The method used to gather the data was a combination of individual interviews, focus groups and use of the school district’s database for access to grades, behavior, and other relevant information for the study.

Description of Sample

In this qualitative action research study, the 15 student participants were selected using quota sampling. Johnson and Christensen (2008) explain quota sampling as “...the researcher identifies the major groups or subgroups of interest, determines the number of people to be included in each of these groups, and then selects convenience samples of people for each group” (p. 238). They summarize by explaining the purpose of sampling by stating, “Sampling is the process of drawing a sample from a population. When we sample, we study the characteristics of a subset (called the sample) selected from a larger group (called the population) in order to understand the characteristics of the larger group (population)” (p. 247). Sampling was necessary in this study because time
constraints would not allow individual interviews for all 65 students enrolled in
the school. In light of the time constraints, this form of sampling provides every
subgroup an opportunity to participate in the study and share their opinions,
without requiring every student's participation.

The 15 students selected to participate in this sample were 10th, 11th and
12th graders during the 2009-2010 school year at a continuation school in an
affluent county in Northern California. The students in this research group had all
shown an improvement in their attendance, grades and behavior when compared
to their previous year at the traditional site. The 15 students selected represented
the school demographics and were diverse based on ethnicity, socio-economic
status, gender, discipline infractions and California Standards Test (CST) scores.
The selected group members included:

1) Six girls and nine boys
2) 20% White, 27% Black, and 53% Latino
3) 27% designated as English Language Learners
4) 7% with Individualized Education Plans
5) 60% with discipline infractions within the past two years
6) 80% received free or reduced lunch
7) 13% proficient, 33% basic, 27% below basic, 27% far below
   basic for English/Language Arts on the CST
8) 7% proficient, 13% basic, 20% below basic and 20% far below
   basic on the math CST (See Appendix A.1)
Method of Individual Interviews

Initially, each student was interviewed individually by the lead site administrator (researcher). The interviews lasted between 30 – 60 minutes, and took place before or after school. A template interview sheet was used during each interview (See Appendix B).

As the only site administrator, the researcher was also a participant in the school. Therefore, the researcher's role became a participant and observer (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). It is acknowledged that the position as assistant principal might have interfered with the validity of the data because students may have been somewhat apprehensive to share candid responses. As a participant researcher there are other challenges a researcher is faced with. For instance, bias can occur, so it was important to not share my own personal feelings with the students or skew student feedback to fit into my own personal beliefs. Since the selected participants were chosen based on demographics, it could be considered a biased sample. Nonrandom samples can be said to be "biased samples because they are almost always systematically different from the population on certain characteristics" (Johnson & Christensen, 2008).

Students were assured that all comments would be kept anonymous. However, the findings of this study and the study itself would be shared with the school faculty and available through the SSU Library. It was explained that the purpose of the study was for school program improvement.
Focus areas for the interviews included:

1) Students’ learning experiences in and out of school, including when and how they learn best
2) The difference between their previous school site and the continuation site
3) What they like and dislike about the continuation school
4) Their belief of what contributes to student success once they attend a continuation high school.

A list of questions can be found in Appendix B.

After the 15 selected students were individually interviewed, the answers for each question were compiled and tallied. During the interviews, student responses were typed. Patterns and themes began to emerge and were noted in a chart (See Appendix A.2) and will be discussed in the findings in Chapter 4.

After the 15 students had been individually interviewed, eight students were asked to participate in a focus group in order to create a forum for students to discuss their opinions and to give honest feedback.

Method of Focus Group

Focus group participants were selected from the 15 student participants. Eight students were selected to participate in two groups of four. These students were chosen by the development of a chart that examined criteria such as ethnicity, free and reduced lunch status, CST scores, gender, and GPA prior to the continuation school and most recent GPA at the continuation school. This was
done to develop focus groups, which were diverse and included the demographics of the larger school population (see Table 1).

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Focus Group A</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>STU #</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| **Focus Group B** |
| STU # | ETH | FRL | CST | Gen | GPA @ Previous | GPA @ current |
| 1 | B | Y | BB/NA | M | 1.5 | 3.83 |
| 6 | W | Y | B/FBB | M | 1.0 | 2.83 |
| 13 | L | Y | FBB/NA | F | 1.17 | 3.43 |
| 8 | B | Y | B/NA | F | 0.71 | 3.11 |

**KEY (for above table )**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>ETH = Ethnicity</th>
<th>FRL = Free &amp; Reduced Lunch</th>
<th>CST = California Standard Testing Results</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>W = White</td>
<td>Y = Yes</td>
<td>FBB = Far Below Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>L = Latino</td>
<td>N = No</td>
<td>BB = Below Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B = Black</td>
<td></td>
<td>B = Basic</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>P = Proficient</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>A = Advanced</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Eight selected students, divided into two groups of four, were left in an empty classroom with a list of topics and a digital recorder. Prior to leaving the students alone, the site administrator (researcher) assigned a facilitator, gave them instructions to stay on topic, explained that they will not get in trouble for anything they share, and encouraged complete honesty and constructive feedback.

At first students sounded hesitant and unsure and didn’t spend much time on the first two questions, but then something happened. They became comfortable, made jokes, spoke candidly, and provided significant feedback.

Each focus group meeting lasted approximately 45 minutes and while the administrator (researcher) was not present (in hopes of students being more candid), their discussion was knowingly recorded on a digital device. At the beginning of the meeting the researcher asked for a student volunteer to be a
facilitator for the meeting. Once selected, the facilitator was given the questions that they were to focus on during the meeting. Students were instructed to be honest about what they think is working and what they think is not working at Oaks High School.

At the end of each focus group the researcher thanked the students for their participation, and a follow-up meeting was scheduled with all four students in each of the two focus groups to meet together with the site administrator (researcher) to debrief their responses after the researcher had an opportunity to listen to the recording. The recordings were not transcribed, but the researcher listened to each groups recording and noted student answers. The follow-up meeting was an opportunity to debrief and for the researcher to ask clarifying questions to some of their responses.

Informal discussions or friendly banter, which seemed off-topic during the focus group were not noted. An example of this is a conversation between student 5 and student 14, where student 5 asks, “Do you think it’s okay to swear?” This is called segmenting. Segmenting was an appropriate method to be used because students were off topic often enough that material discussed was completely irrelevant to the research in this study. Johnson & Christensen, 2008 explain segmenting as a way to “…divide the data into meaningful analytical units” (p.534). Segmenting should be used when you see or hear a “…segment that has a specific meaning that might be important for the research study or that has meaning the researcher thinks should be documented” (p.534).
Development of Questions

Questions during the initial interview were meant to probe students' opinions on what they believe is working at the school site, when they are engaged in a class lesson, and what they dislike about the overall school program. Individual interview questions were developed using key ideas identified in the literature review and key regularities in the school. Students' views were probed on student engagement, features of an optimal learning environment, effective teaching strategies, attendance, and expectations. For example, when discussing student engagement students were asked to explain a time when they've been engaged and a time when they were not, including the circumstances of each. Students were asked to make suggestions on school reform and improvements. See list of questions from individual interviews in Appendix B.

Focus group questions were constructed as a result of the individual interview responses. Key themes and ideas that were continually brought up by students were selected to use as a discussion piece in the focus group. For example, all 15 students expressed during the individual interviews that they had become better students since attending the continuation school; with this in mind question number 1 in the focus group was generated. During the individual interviews each student was asked to recall a time when s/he were engaged in school. Questions 2 and 3 in the focus group template asks students to recall a time when they were actively learning and enjoyed a class (at anytime in their school career) as well as a time when they felt that they were not learning. Questions 4 & 5 were meant to spark a discussion on what they enjoy and dislike
about Oaks High School. During individual interviews students were asked to select the top three things they like best about Oaks High School. Question 6 in the focus group template was created to allow students an opportunity to collectively develop a list of what they believe helps students find success at this continuation school.

*Analysis*

After interviews with students were conducted, student responses were noted and then analyzed and examined closely to determine trends, patterns, and differences. The analysis was conducted by reviewing the most commonly mentioned topics students liked best about the site and why they felt they had improved their academic performance once they began attending the continuation school.

Another strategy used during the focus group included stimulating new ideas and creative concepts (Johnson & Christensen, 2008). In this strategy, students were asked to list the top 10-15 factors contributing to their success at Oaks High School. If certain responses were listed by both focus groups and were shared more often than others during the individual interviews, these responses were used in creating the circle of success, which is an inclusive list of factors that students believe have contributed to their finding success at Oaks High School (See Table 2 on page 52).

The shape of a circle was created by the researcher rather than a pyramid of hierarchy because when asked to develop a list of the top 10-15 contributing factors both focus groups were unable to rank the factors in order. Both sets of
groups stated that they did not believe that one thing helped more than another; but rather all of the factors, including interventions, policies, and staff support, worked in conjunction with one another to create a successful environment and school experience.

Once the researcher met with both focus groups and completed the 15 individual interviews data was analyzed by a classification system called typology. Johnson and Christensen explain typology as a “classification system that breaks something down into its different types or kinds” (p. 545). “Typologies are useful because they help make sense out of qualitative data. These could be one-dimensional typologies such as types of teaching strategies used by teachers” (p.545). The researcher did the following:

1) Compiled the data shared by students
2) Typed a chart of pros and cons for each group from their hand written notes
3) Created the circle of success rather than listing all factors in no particular order
4) Designed a chart (which can be found in Appendix A.2) of individual responses from the interviews
5) Wrote students’ ideas regarding best practices to be shared with staff and school officials.

This analysis led to the findings reported in the next chapter.
Chapter Four: Findings

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to gain an understanding of what students believe contributes to their success at this continuation high school. Guided by the individual student interviews and student focus groups, this process illustrates what students believe is working and what they think should be changed at the school site. These students, who were once struggling at the traditional sites, are now able to find academic success. By academic success they are now experiencing increased GPA’s, engagement in subject areas, participation during class time, increased attendance rate, and a commitment to their education.

Each student in the research sample was asked to identify the most important factors that contributed to their success. Focus groups were asked to develop a list of the top 10-15 factors that they believed were the most beneficial in contributing to their academic success (See Table 2 on page 52).

For the interview process students were encouraged to provide candid responses, without concern for affecting their status in the school. It should be noted that the site administrator (researcher) may have interfered with the validity of the data because students might have been somewhat apprehensive to share candid responses (as discussed in Chapter 3). In an attempt to override this tendency two focus groups of four students each were selected to discuss written prompts. Without the administrator present (in hopes of students being more candid), their discussions were knowingly recorded using a digital device.
Analysis of Student Interviews (See Appendix A.2) and Focus Group Findings

The following section will share the results of the individual student interviews and focus group discussions. Quotes shared are from BOTH individual interviews as well as focus group discussions. The source of each quote is identified. This next section will discuss these aspects that students believe are helping them find success. A section identifying areas students felt were not as helpful to their success then follows this.

A. Contributing Factors to Students Success

From the interviews and focus groups, students identified that small class size, active assignments, no homework, relationships, structured and family environment, and high expectations played a critical role in their success.

*Smaller Class Size.* All 15 students shared the view that smaller class sizes helped them, mainly because they felt “lost” in the larger classes. Twelve students stated that the smaller class size allowed the students to receive more one-on-one instruction from teachers, thus receiving the extra help they need. Bruce Barker (1986) in the article, The Advantages of Small Schools” discusses the reasons why students tend to perform better in a small community. Barker shares,

There are fewer students to be leaders...hence, students are generally exposed to more opportunity to develop leadership skills in a greater diversity of situations. Often, literally everyone must participate in order to make a project a success. This promotes among students a sense of belonging, of pride in their community, their school, and themselves. As a result, students are likely to have better attitudes toward school and less likely to create discipline problems. (Reducing class size to
increase student achievement is an approach that has been tried, debated, and analyzed for several decades. The premise seems logical: with fewer students to teach, teachers can coax better performance from each of them. But what does the research show? (p. 1)

Active Assignments. All 15 students had a clear preference for what could be called active curriculum and assignments. Active was chosen to describe instructional activities that were discussed as, “hands-on” and contained opportunities for discussion, not lecture. Student examples, such as the quotes listed below explain what types of “active” learning they enjoy participating in while in class. These examples were referred to consistently. All 15 Students also seemed to enjoy more variety in the classroom in terms of teachers’ strategies. They suggested the use of visual aids (power points), games, hands-on activities or labs, and humor when teaching. Below are some of the students’ responses where students express this preference for interaction and activity:

I like when we are a country and we have to convince other countries to become our allies. This is a fun game, but makes us discuss the issues. *(Individual Interview, Student 1)*

Talking with the class about interesting topics and playing games to prepare for a test or a quiz. *(Individual Interview, Student 3)*

Working with other students in my class to do projects or posters that we have to present to the class. Even though I get embarrassed sometimes, it helps me have to remember the information. *(Individual Interview, Student 12)*

Working in pairs to do a project or tutoring another student in my class. *(Focus Group A, Student 4)*
I like when we work on the computer. *(Individual Interview, Student 5)*

*No Homework.* Of the 15 interviewed students, 14 stated that one of the most important things that allows them to find success is not having any homework. Each student presented a different reason why they believe this policy worked for them. Answers include having to work 30 or more hours a week to support their family, taking care of their younger siblings, not having the parental support to complete assignments, and laziness. In fact, expert Alfie Kohn, in his article, Down with Homework, researched and found little connection between student achievement and homework. Although he did find a correlation between homework and test scores, it tends to be small. He states:

No study has ever confirmed the widely accepted assumption that homework yields nonacademic benefits—self-discipline, independence, perseverance, or better time-management skills—for students of any age. The idea that homework builds character or improves study skills is basically a myth. (p.44)

*Relationships with Staff and Faculty.* Twelve students enjoyed the close relationships between staff and students and the fact that “teachers actually care here.” The students’ idea of caring represented taking the extra time to review hard to understand problems, asking about their day, taking interest in their lives, having patience, and being strict but supportive. Below are some of their responses:

*(English teacher)* really takes the time to know all of us really well. She sets expectations based on our abilities and I like the individual lessons. She is teaching us to be good citizens. *Focus Group A,*
Student 14)

It's cool 'cause (resource teacher) and (history teacher) will play basketball with us during lunch or after school. They take time to be around us, not just in the classroom. *(Individual Interview, Student 2)*

(History teacher) is chill, he's like a friend, but we respect him as our teacher. He's flexible, if we get off topic, but are still focusing on history he'll guide us through the discussion and we learn. He doesn't just tell us to get back on track. He sees that we're interested in something and then teaches it to us. *(Focus Group A, Student 5)*

Structured Environment. Ten students explained that the high structure and support keep them on track. They concluded that having to wear "profanity shirts" when they swear, and staff knowing right away if they have left campus or are late to class ensure that they are on their best behavior most of the time. This structured environment with direct consequences doesn't allow a lot of room for error, which students sometimes may complain about, but actually expressed appreciation for in the interviews and during the focus group discussions. Below are some of the students' responses:

Knowing that (the administrator) can hear me because she's right down the hall, helps keep me in line. *(Focus Group B, Student 6)*

Most of the teachers have the same rules and it makes it easy to remember because they all follow the same policies. – *(Individual Interview, Student 11)*

(The administrator) is always walking around, and asks me how I'm doing or notices something like someone got a haircut. *(Focus Group B, Student 13)*

It's weird, but I kind of like having to wear the profanity shirts. At other schools if you swear
teachers don’t even care, but here, at least they’re trying to teach us to use better vocabulary to prepare us for the real world and jobs and stuff. *(Focus Group A, Student 14)*

At (previous school) I could ditch every day and nothing really happened, I would just fail my classes, but no one really cared. Here you can’t get away with anything and that helps me. *(Individual Interview, Student 10)*

*Family Environment.* Ten students explained that they like the fact that students from all different backgrounds actually hang out in the school together, respect each other, and get to know each other; which they believe doesn’t happen at the larger sites. This was described as being like a family by Student 4, as illustrated below. Students also expressed liking that the staff, including the administrator, knows them really well and cares. Some student responses were:

I’ve never been at a school where I get along with the principal and they give me discipline, but I know they still care. *(Focus Group B, Student 6)*

We all get along, play basketball or soccer, hang out in the halls, or whatever. It’s really chill, which makes it easy to focus on my studies, instead of the drama. *(Individual Interview, Student 7).*

I love that there’s no drama, everyone is here for the same reason, to graduate. *(Individual Interview, Student 9)*

We’re like a family, even if someone’s mad at someone else it’s handled with words and then it’s over. We all really care about each other, it’s cool. *(Focus Group A, Student 4)*
Mandatory Tutorial. Nine students like the mandatory tutorial, which requires students achieving below a C- to remain after school for an additional period of tutoring from their teacher. Some statements they made were:

Being on tutorial and making us getting the teacher's help makes it so we're not allowed to fail. (Individual Interview, Student 9)

I've never been at a school where we're pushed so hard to pass, that we are not given an option to just not do the work, we have to do it, whether it's during class or in tutorial. (Individual Interview, Student 2)

Even though I've never been on it (tutorial) I think it's really good, if they would've had something like this at my old high school, maybe I wouldn't have had to come to (the school in the study). (Focus Group A, Student 14)

High Expectations. Eight students like the No Excuses College Prep message as explained in Chapter 1. This message stresses the importance of preparing for post-secondary education, and ensuring that every student is college ready if they choose to attend. Some comments students shared related to this were:

College Club is pretty cool, I like all of the parties we have each month for doing well. (Focus Group B, Student 1)

I've never been given an award of any kind my entire life in school, College Club is the first thing I've gotten and I was so proud to show my parents my College Club card. (Individual Interview, Student 15)

I never really thought about college or that I could actually go, now that I'm graduating and see how
good I can do in school when I really try I know I'm gonna' go to the community college in the fall. (Focus Group A, Student 3)

I like how much the school and the teachers talk about college, even though I get kind of sick of hearing it, I know they want me to go to college and now I really want to go for myself. (Focus Group B, Student 8)

**Decided on their Own.** Seven students said that they decided it was time to turn it around and to start taking school more seriously as this "was it."

I knew this was it, if I didn’t do well here I wasn’t going to get my diploma, so something in me just changed. (Focus Group B, Student 6)

Once you have to come to Oaks High School you know that you’ve kind of hit rock bottom and you better get it together or you’ll get kicked out and then not be able to graduate at all. (Individual Interview, Student 12)

I dunno what it was, it just kind of happened, but I guess I finally decided to listen to everyone and take school more seriously. (Focus Group A, Student 14)

**Additional Ways to Earn Credits.** Five students like the additional ways to regain credit that help speed up the credit recovery process. This process allows students to earn additional credit by taking home extra credit work, rather than completing embedded homework. Elective credits can be earned through community service, and outdoor education, and participating in after school activities such as sobriety class, men’s group, girls gone green group, or pregnancy prevention class. A thought one student shared was:
I like that if I’m motivated and want to do it, I can ask for extra credit assignments or do community service or something and earn different types of credits. *(Individual Interview, Student 13)*

**Attendance Policy.** Five students like the attendance policy, which requires students to attend school daily or receive a loss of credits for days missed. Thoughts they shared were:

Even though it’s really strict, we all know that we don’t have a choice, we have to come to school or we’re getting sent back to (previous school), county community or adult education. At my old school I had one of the worst attendance rates, but since I’ve been a student here I’ve only been late like five times and absent when I was really sick with a fever. *(Focus Group A, Student 14)*

We all know this is our last chance, so we make sure to come to school on time and never ditch cause we can’t afford to lose our credits. *(Individual Interview, Student 11)*

I like how we have an incentive to come to school every day in order to receive our credits and get extra credit homework packets. *(Individual Interview, Student 9)*

**Positive Messages.** Four students like the new signs and messages that are hung around the campus, such as SLANT(explain), Building Bridges to College, PRIDE (Positive Results in Daily Effort), and Freedom through Responsibility.

We didn’t have all the college signs and SLANT messages last year, I like them. SLANT helps me remember to sit up and pay attention. *(Individual Interviews, Student 8)*
I like all the posters that tell us positive things, like college bound and stuff. *(Individual Interview, Student 10)*

*Behavior Sheets.* Two students shared that they like the behavior sheets (a.k.a. blue sheets) rather than being sent to the office with a referral. These sheets are given to students after they have been warned to improve their behavior. This is the step prior to being sent to the office with a referral.

I like that I get a ‘blue sheet’ instead of a referral on my permanent record, but sometimes (my math teacher) just gives them to me without a warning and I feel like it’s not always fair. *(Individual Interview, Student 9)*

The following section focuses on what students believe is getting in the way of their finding complete academic success at Oaks High School.

**B. Factors Students’ Identified as Not Helpful to their Success**

*Bookwork.* Nine students shared a disdain for what they called “bookwork” (answering questions from the textbook and writing answers in a journal or notebook), long lectures, and note taking. The following are some examples of what students dislike about Oaks High School:

It’s hella boring when we just read the book to ourselves and then have to answer questions at the end, I don’t even really read it, I just go straight to the questions at the end….it’s not really learning. *(Focus Group B, Student 1)*

When (science teacher) is just talking and talking and talking. I really like him, but it’s hecka boring. Are we just supposed to sit there and just listen to him talk? *(Focus Group B, Student 13)*
(Math teacher) doesn’t make lessons fun. I already hate math and when she has a monotone voice and we work off of a worksheet or out of the book it’s even more boring. (Focus Group B, Student 6)

**Goal Sheets.** Five students don’t see the purpose of the academic goal sheets, which are given out each quarter and students are asked to commit to one academic goal for the quarter, and three strategies that will help them reach their goal. The complaints they shared were:

I don’t really get why we have to write new goals every quarter. We all either have goals or we don’t, writing them down isn’t going to make it more meaningful. *(Individual Interview, Student 7)*

I pretty much write the same goal every quarter and that’s to graduate. I usually forget what I even wrote so I don’t really see the reason of doing it at all. *(Focus Group A, Student 5)*

**Lack of Homework and Behavior Sheets.** Three students believe we need to require students to do some homework, rather than an optional extra credit homework assignment, in order to help better prepare them for college. This is in contrast to the finding that no homework was one of the main contributing factors to their success.

Three students don’t like the behavior sheets (a.k.a. blue sheets) given out by teachers. As explained before, these sheets are given to students after they have been warned to improve their behavior. This is the step prior to being sent to the office with a referral. Students felt these do not help because they believe nothing really happens from them and it wastes their time.
I don’t like the ‘blue sheets’ because I can end up losing credit if I don’t fill it out fast enough or right and sometimes I don’t think I even did anything wrong. *(Individual Interview, Student 7)*

**Other Findings from Focus Group Categorizing**

In the focus group, students were given a list of policies and asked to categorize them placing them in a pro or con column and have a discussion on why they have placed it in each category. SLANT indicates the acronym for Sit-up, Lean forward, Ask questions, Nod, and Track the speaker (SLANT). Oaks High School shares a campus with the larger traditional comprehensive site. The Oaks campus itself is only five classrooms, a small office area and an outside lunch area (Small campus). There is only one teacher per subject, so students are not able to ask to transfer classes or receive instruction from an alternative teacher (Only One Teacher Per Subject). Each quarter students are required to fill out a form where they indicate what their academic goal will be for the quarter and three strategies that will help them reach their goal (Setting Academic Goals). There are no excuses; all students will be prepared for college (No Excuses Motto). Teacher’s changed their grading policy, and students grades are reflected based on their assessments, rather than their behavior as it was in the past. Currently, most of the teachers at Oaks High School assess students weekly through tests/quizzes (Increased Academic Rigor). The campus can only hold 65 students at its current location (Small School). Students are required to earn a minimum of 18 credits, which requires them to earn at least 3 additional units aside from their regular class schedule (18 Credit Policy). If students have received a referral, failed to attend mandatory tutorial, or participated in
something that must result in a consequence that is not a required suspension, students are referred to serve an In-house suspension, rather than an actual suspension. If a student receives an In-house suspension, s/he does not receive a non-participation point, as would be the case with suspension. Signs are posted around campus that read positive messages, such as “Freedom through Responsibility,” “PRIDE” (Positive Results in Daily Effort), and “Building Bridges to College” (Positive Signs). Students who accrue more than three absences lose academic credit (Attendance Policy). Students who use profanity are required to wear a fluorescent colored shirt that reads positive messages, such as “Be profound, not profane,” “Words can hurt,” etc. If they have accrued more than three shirts they are sent to an In-house suspension for the day (profanity shirts). Students who receive a C- or below in any academic class must attend school for an additional period of tutoring, either in the morning before school begins or after school (Mandatory Tutorial). Each month teachers select any number of students who have shown academic commitment in their schoolwork, attendance, and behavior. These selected students are given a college club card and are rewarded with a celebration each month they are chosen (College Club). Students are given Non-Participation Points if they are sent out of class for misbehavior, absent, or in class but not working. For every four Non-Participation Points students lose .5 credits (Non-Participation Points).

An activity during the focus group asked students to create a list of the top 10-15 factors (see table 2 below) that they believe have played the most significant role in their growth as academic learners.
Table 2

Circle of Success

- Smaller Class Size
- 1:1 Instruction
- No Homework
- Student Teacher Relationship
- High Structure
- Mandatory Tutorial
- Attendance Policy
- High Expectations
- Academic Counselor
- "Family" Atmosphere (safe)
- Extra Credit Opportunities
- Supportive Staff
- Creative Discipline
- Quarter System

Both focus groups listed many of the same things, which include:

1) Family atmosphere
2) No homework policy
3) Supportive staff
4) Mandatory tutorial

The first three are related to the ideas expressed in the individual interviews.

The chart below indicates the evaluation students assigned to these policies.

On the positive side students indicated an appreciation for the increased expectations in regards to grade performance (mandatory tutorial), attendance rate (non-participation points and attendance policy), and credit completion (earning a minimum of 18 credits each quarter). The explanations given by the focus groups include that since they are here for credit recovery, perfect attendance and maximum credits are imperative.
Since we're here because we've failed classes, it's only fair for us to earn as many credits as we can each quarter. We should all earn at least 18 credits. *(Focus Group A, Student 14)*

On the negative side, students shared they did not like sharing a campus.

Every time I on go onto (the traditional comprehensive high school site) to go to the cafeteria, I feel like I am a criminal and have to be escorted up and down to our campus. *(Focus Group A, Student 4)*.

Students had several items where they held mixed views; therefore when categorizing they put them in both the pro and con category. See the chart below for results.

<table>
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<th>Focus Group A</th>
<th>(Table 3)</th>
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<td>Profanity Shirts</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Non-participation Points</td>
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Discussion

The results of the interviews and focus group demonstrate that students, no matter their background, have very similar beliefs in what contributes to their success.

During the individual interviews, despite being given open-ended questions, students shared similar responses as to why this continuation school helped turn their academic performance around.

The main point identified in the interviews and focus groups is that the students feel that the smaller school size allows them to feel more like a family, providing the needed structure. This builds relationships among staff and students, allowing students a better opportunity to find success in their education. Students seem to have an appreciation for the high structure, which includes the attendance policy, profanity policy, mandatory tutorial, and supportive staff. The no-homework policy allows the students an opportunity to take home extra credit assignments, and a chance to prove their success inside the classroom. During the individual interviews, when students were asked to list three things they would change about Oaks High School, most of them had difficulty listing the three things they felt needed to be changed. However, during the focus groups students shared a dislike for bookwork, academic goal-setting, and the behavior reflection sheets. This is interesting because while some students shared a dislike for goal-setting and behavior reflection sheets, others explained that they find them helpful. The students who shared their dislike for the academic goal setting explained that they already knew what their goals were and felt all students
should already know and writing them out is meaningless. While the students who felt it was helpful, like the idea of focusing on an academic goal, but didn’t find the process of only writing it out once and reviewing it 6 weeks later helpful. They shared that they would prefer more opportunities to review their goals. Students who shared a dislike for the behavior sheets seemed to be the students who received a behavior sheet more often. Students who had never received a behavior sheet or only filled one out one or two times preferred the sheet to a discipline referral. Overall, students shared an appreciation for the school and the staff, and have found what they consider to be success in school.

There is a clear connection between student success and their need to belong and be recognized for their accomplishments. This is consistent with Krovetz (1999) who shares that students need a sense of belonging and cooperative learning, including the celebration of success. He concludes with the importance of school leaders spending quality time with their staff and students alike. At the school site in this study students are recognized, honored and celebrated throughout the year. The data provided in this study show a strong correlation between student success and the intimate school setting, which is referred to often as “a family,” and the strong relationships students share with each other and the staff.

Building a student-teacher connection will help students take pride in their own learning and has proven to be of utmost importance for student success rates. As discussed in Chapter 2, Dr. Donna Beegle (2006) shares that academic rigor was not enough to shift the focus for her Title I school, but that developing a
trusting relationship with students is key in creating a strong foundation. By being inclusive schools are validating the importance of student voice and respecting all students, not just the high achieving ones.

Students who tend to be at-risk of not graduating generally do not have a connection or interest in school; if they did they would not be at-risk of not graduating. Lebedina-Manzoni discovered that unsuccessful students assess their failure to a variety of reasons, including “…boredom, current mood of professors, disorganization of faculty, overload with obligations, and boring lectures” (p.706). It is a teacher’s responsibility to make the connection and bring out the interest, making the learning meaningful so that the at-risk students find value in learning the material.

Learning does not have to be painful. It can be exciting. When teachers create connections for the students so they are able to see value in the material, they are helping spark that interest and make learning a meaningful experience. This is confirmed by the students’ descriptions of what helps them at Oaks High School.

Students also acknowledged the importance of the small intimate school setting where everyone knows and respects one another, and all students are valued for what they can bring into the classroom. These students feel teacher-student connections are formed and they appreciate the diversity and culture they bring to the school community.
Chapter Five: Summary and Recommendations

Summary

The themes identified in this study suggest areas that students feel have contributed and continue to contribute to their success. In addition, students at this school seem to have a generally positive view of their current education at the continuation school. Approximately 80% of the sample appeared to be engaged in school and experienced a sense of belonging. The remaining 20% echoed the same themes, but indicated that school was still somewhat boring, sometimes unfair, and that certain teachers did not care as much as they should.

It was interesting that students had similar responses to what they liked about the continuation school, as well as what teachers do that help keep them motivated. When asked, "What does the teacher do that helps motivate you?" almost all of the students shared that the teacher shows care for them. The teachers who are able to motivate their students express a genuine interest for them and are willing to listen. Students reported that they are more motivated to learn from teachers who cared about them. They also shared a similar thought that teachers who care put more time into lesson planning and create learning experiences for the students beyond worksheets or taking notes from the book.

Students who struggled in a certain subject, particularly at the larger sites, and seemed disengaged in their classes most frequently shared the belief that the teacher showed little care about them, offered little to no support of support.
There was nobody to help me at (previous school). The teachers didn’t even care what kind of grade I had. They didn’t want to help me. *(Individual Interview, Student 1)*

Susan Barnard, Washington Teacher of the Year and alternative educator, also identified this importance of students’ being recognized and known. In Townes’ (2009) *Conversations with America’s Best Teachers* he interviews Barnard and asks, “What lessons about teaching at-risk students can traditional schools learn from a school like yours?” Barnard shares:

I think seeing them as real people rather than seeing them as the kids with blue hair and piercings or judging them because they wear baggy jeans and shades. If traditional school chooses those things as battles, then they have already put a wall up between them and those students. We try hard to be non-judgmental and see each of our kids as individuals with real value from the time they walk in the door. Many of these kids have already been labeled as “trouble makers and have often been kicked out of school because of these things. These kids hide under their hats and hoods and shades because they’re shy or they don’t feel like they fit in. We understand that and accept them for who they are, and all of them eventually lower their guards and come to feel pretty good about themselves. Schools that make judgments based on outward appearances have already lost half of the battle. *(p. 161)*

Barnard also (Townes’, 2009) describes her effective teaching strategy in her art and biology classes called, “Read-Right Systems.” Students come into the classroom and take out their assignments and begin working individually in their own area of the room. Barnard and her teaching assistant move around the room throughout the period and work with each student. She explains that it can get a
bit noisy, but it is effective because every student is working and reading at his or her own level, "...so it's worth it" (p.163). Making learning meaningful is not easy, but it is necessary. Students at any school need to find a connection to the material being taught; this is no different at a continuation school. Findings from both individual interviews and focus groups indicate that students believe they do better in school partly because the teachers at Oaks High School create lesson plans that are interesting to the students and listen to what types of things students want to learn.

I like when we learn vocab. words in English that I can use in real life and at job interviews and stuff. (Individual Interview, Student 3)

Findings from the focus group and individual interviews show that students made connections to their increased academics and the small learning environment that incorporated active learning.

In the interviews, Oaks' students also seem to have a difficult time at the traditional school sites due to peer relationships.

I was focusing so much on hanging out with the wrong people, I was making bad decisions. (Focus Group B, Student 13)

I was hanging out with my so-called friends and they were ditching and not really caring about school, so I got all caught up in that mess and started doing the same kind of thing. (Focus Group A, Student 4)

Building relationships seems to be an important factor in students finding success at the traditional and continuation site.
Continuation schools provide the students an opportunity to be themselves, feel respected, and gain a sense of belonging. The circle of success that students created in the focus groups (See Table 2 on page 52) displays the top factors (in no particular order) on why students believe they are able to find success once they arrive at the continuation school.

This data is helpful in validating that the students appreciate the highly structured environment, intimate relationships, and active learning opportunities. With these in place the school can continue to provide students with a successful school experience.

Most of the current policies were implemented over the past three years to help provide a more structured learning environment in hopes of creating a successful place for students to learn. These policies require students to be held accountable for their actions, including attendance, earning extra credit, using appropriate language, and many others. While it may have taken time for students to understand the significance of the new rules and policies, it seems as though they have grown to appreciate and value the structure that it provides.

Recommendations

As a result of the findings we will continue to hold practices and policies in place based on what students revealed as helping them in school. Class sizes will remain under 20 students when possible, no-homework will be required, teachers will be encouraged to continue to build positive relationships with students, providing a structured environment which holds students accountable for their actions, mandatory tutorial will remain in tact in order to provide students
with support in challenging classes, holding high expectations emphasizing the importance of being college ready, continue the attendance policy which has the ability to impact their credits earned, and designing lesson plans that allow students opportunities to earn additional credits.

After careful review of the students recommendations the staff needs to collaboratively look at the behavior reflection sheet process and implement changes that will allow the student to feel that completing the sheet is a productive alternative to a referral, not just something to keep them occupied while they have been removed from class. Class lessons should be improved in order to create a meaningful experience every day, all the time for every student. Changes need to occur with academic goal sheets. Students complete the academic goal sheet at the beginning of every quarter and then review it, to see if they’ve accomplished it, made progress or did not reach it, at the end of every quarter. While it is important for students to set goals, this process needs to be thought out in greater detail and more time must be put into helping the students understand the importance of setting goals, remembering the goals, and making the goals become a reality.

One of the most important developments from this study is the realization that a process of including and seeking students’ views has begun and will now continue in order to help create a better school. By involving students, asking for their input, and allowing them an opportunity to be heard, the school is recognizing that student voice is valuable and can begin to make necessary changes that will enhance student learning. This finding is consistent with
research cited in Chapter Two. Fletcher (2005) explains the importance of meaningful student involvement, Certo et al. (2003) discuss what influences student involvement, and Battistich et al. (1991) maintain that classroom discussion -- where students have the opportunity to express personal opinions -- gives students the opportunity to discover that others care. This finding will be shared with the school faculty and additional ways to seek student input and views will be developed. One possibility may be a survey of students each quarter to look more closely at their learning experiences. Allowing students an opportunity to regularly provide feedback and making changes according to their feedback can provide evidence to the students that their voice is valued and heard.

Now that the students' voices have been heard, it is time to apply some of their suggestions to the next school year's policies, vision, and mission statement. Continuing to provide a forum where students feel comfortable sharing their ideas, dislikes, and likes can help to provide a nurturing environment where students realize the value of speaking up and understanding the importance of their own voice. O'Brien (2006) shares that his belief as an Executive Director and extensive researcher in Child's Rights Program is: "...if students are given effective voice in school, they are more likely to exercise an effective voice in their post-school lives" (p.1). Allowing the students an opportunity to speak out and be heard is only the beginning. In years to come it is recommended that students be invited to join committees and develop clubs to help improve school rules and policies. After reading the literature and conducting student interviews, it seems obvious that by creating a culture that values student input, we are also
creating a community where students are empowered and take pride in their learning. Students are truly the foundation of a high functioning school and if students have ownership in the school’s values, the school can only continue to improve. The best way to create student ownership is to allow the students to have their say. George Wood (2005), an educator, said: “We learn socially responsible behavior the way we learn everything else, through practice. Unfortunately, the way we set up our high schools gives students very few opportunities to actually practice responsible behavior” (p. 125). O’Brien responds to Wood’s belief by sharing, “…student voice provides the opportunity for practice, which is greatly needed” (p. 2).
References


## Appendix A.1

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Why Students Believe They Find Success at the Continuation School - *Individual Interview Results*

- Behavior Sheets
- Positive Messages
- Attendance Policy
- Additional Ways to Earn Credit
- Decided on their Own
- High Expectations
- Mandatory Tutorial
- Family Atmosphere
- Structured Environment
- Relationships with Staff & Faculty
- No Homework
- Active Assignments
- Smaller Class Size

![Bar Chart showing reasons for success at Continuation School](chart.png)

- Number of Students

0 2 4 6 8 10 12 14 16
Appendix B

Intro

1. Tell me about your experiences learning in school.

Student Engagement / Interest

2. Describe a time when you learned something (in or out of school).
   2a. Why did you choose this to describe (why do you remember this event)?

Success

3. When was a time that you felt you were successful (in or out of school)
   3a. What do you believe helped you to be successful?
   3b. What did you do to help your success?
   3c. What, if anything, did others do?
   3d. If it does not already apply to school, how can you apply this strategy to school?

4. When was a time that you felt you were unsuccessful (in or out of school).
   4a. What do you believe caused you to be unsuccessful?
   4b. What did you do that led to this lack of success?
   4c. What, if anything, did others do?

5. What does a successful student at Oaks look/act like?
   5a. Why is this success?

6. Do you think students are able to find success at Oaks?
   6a. Why not? If yes see next question.
   6b. If yes, why do you feel students are able to be successful at aks

7. Has Oaks helped you be a successful learner?
   7a. Why or why not?

Changes

8. Since you’ve been a student at Oaks have you noticed a change in your performance?
   8a. Why or why not?
Second year students:

9. Since you were here last year what changes have you noticed, if any for the following:
   9a. Students
   9b. Teachers
   9c. School culture
   9d. Expectations

10. Describe what changes you like and dislike and why.

Current Perception

11. How is Oaks different from your previous school?

12. What do you like about Oaks?

13. Name three things that you think Oaks does that may help students become successful and explain why.

14. What do you dislike at Oaks?

15. What would you like changed?

16. Name three things that you think Oaks needs to change to help improve education for all students and explain why.
Appendix C

Focus Group Questions

1. What made you decide to start doing better in school?

2. Explain a time, anytime and at any school, when you were engaged (interested and learning) during a class lesson. What made it engaging?

3. Explain a time, anytime and at any school, when you were not engaged (uninterested and not learning) during a class lesson. Why was it not engaging?

4. What do you dislike most about Oaks and why?

5. What do you like best about Oaks and why?

6. Develop a list of the top 10-15 things that contributes to students’ success at Oaks and the reason why beneath it

Put the following in a column under pro or con:

Profanity shirts
Mandatory tutorial
Non-participation points
Attendance policy
College club
Setting academic goals
No excuses motto
SLANT
Small campus
Sharing a campus
Small school (65 students)
18 credits policy
In-house instead of suspension
Positive signs (PRIDE, etc)
Increased academic rigor
Only one teacher per subject
Appendix D

Invitation and Consent to Participate

Dear Student:

You are invited to participate in a study of student views of school and what contributes to success at a continuation school. This study is being conducted by me, Kessa Early, as a partial requirement for the Masters Degree at Sonoma State University. I hope to learn what students believe helps them succeed in school, particularly at a continuation school. This information will also help our school to continue to improve and better assist students. You were selected as a possible participant in this study because you are or have been a student at Oaks Continuation High School.

If you decide to participate, we will meet at a mutually agreeable time, either before or after school, in small or large group and individually on occasion to discuss your views of school and what is working at our school site, as well as what you feel needs to be changed or removed. We will meet at least once a month between the months of December thru February. Additional meetings may be requested. Meetings will last between 30 – 60 minutes.

Your candid honesty is valued. For your participation, you will receive .25 credits for each hour you spend in a meeting for this project.

Your views and opinions will be kept confidential and all information will be anonymous in any reports. By signing this document, you are agreeing to participate and giving me permission to use this information in my study and any upcoming reports. Please remember your identity will be confidential and coded.

Your decision whether or not to participate will not prejudice your future relations with Sonoma State University and Marin Oaks High School. If you decide to participate, you are free to withdraw your consent and to discontinue participation at any time without recourse.

If you have any questions, please ask me. I can be reached at school by email kearlV@nusd.org or by telephone (415) 892-8733. You can also contact my committee chair, Dr. Viki Montera, through email at vimontera@sonoma.edu

YOU ARE MAKING A DECISION WHETHER OR NOT TO PARTICIPATE. YOUR SIGNATURE INDICATES THAT YOU HAVE DECIDED TO PARTICIPATE HAVING READ THE INFORMATION PROVIDED ABOVE.

My age is ______ years old. (If you are not at least 18 years old you may not participate in this study without the signature of your parent or guardian). Please return this form to me by December 11, 2009.

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