NORTH CAROLINA HIGH SCHOOL ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL ADMINISTRATORS' PERCEPTIONS OF SCHOOL PERFORMANCE MEASURES

by

Shannon D. Clemons

A dissertation submitted to the faculty of
The University of North Carolina at Charlotte
in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Doctor of Education in
Educational Leadership

Charlotte

2022

Approved by:

_____
Dr. Rebecca Shore

_____
Dr. Xiaoxia Newton

_____
Dr. Claudia Flowers

_____
Dr. Chance Lewis

ABSTRACT

SHANNON D. CLEMONS. North Carolina High School Alternative School Administrators and Perceptions of School Performance Measures (Under the direction of Dr. REBECCA SHORE)

This qualitative study investigates the perceptions of alternative school administrators in North Carolina about the impact of the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) on them and their campuses. The study interviewed four alternative high school administrators with schools labeled as Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) during the 2018-2019 school year due to low graduation rate and/or low performance. Analyses of the data suggested that participants perceive the ESSA guidelines for school performance as unfair and inequitable to alternative schools. There is also a perception that the guidelines demonstrate a lack of understanding of alternative schools, alternative school students, and alternative education on the part of those who develop accountability guidelines.

The impact of these guidelines has resulted in changes to some practices on participants' campuses and afforded these schools to receive additional funding. Administrators perceive these accountability standards have no impact on their professional career but have increased their stress. Findings indicate that alternative school administrators perceive that the people who assist and are involved in the lives of students, and their academic and social-emotional interventions, appear to be the most important strategies that can lead to successful outcomes for their students. The alternative school administrators in this study acknowledge the funding received as a result of the ESSA designation has provided additional resources on their campuses and allowed more opportunities for their students.

The study results also indicate the ESSA designations could result in some negative outcomes for alternative schools and students. Administrators new to the profession could avoid

serving in alternative schools because of their current status or potential to receive an ESSA designation. Additionally, if a student is not on track to graduate on time or has significant cognitive deficiencies, alternative schools may deny enrollment for these students because of the negative impact on the schools' ESSA score.

Conclusions include a need for more awareness of the differences between traditional and alternative schools, the students served on these campuses, and more awareness of equity in education, specifically accountability and school performance. It is also important to understand the negative impact that could further alienate alternative schools, and the unintended consequences of ESSA on the students served or those who need to be served on these campuses.

DEDICATION

To all alternative school administrators…

Continue to be passionate and purposeful in your work with these students who need you more than they know. Do not lose hope.

and

To my dad, the late Willie James Clemons

I only had you the first ten years of my life.

Your love and influence continue to motivate me.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First, I acknowledge and thank God for His amazing grace. I am grateful for the encouragement and guidance of my dissertation chair, Dr. Rebecca Shore. To my entire team, Dr. Claudia Flowers, Dr. Xiaoxia Newton, and Dr. Chance Lewis, thank you for your support. There is no way I could have made it through this journey without you. I am forever grateful.

To my family: my mother, Lucille Clemons, for your constant encouragement, love, and enthusiasm I am forever grateful. To my sister, Shawn Clemons, you have always been my inspiration. I am blessed to follow in your footsteps. To all of my family and friends who have been there through this journey, thank you for always pushing me to keep going and checking on my progress.

Finally, I acknowledge and thank the University of North Carolina at Charlotte for providing a world-class educational experience. I appreciate the privilege and opportunity to study and glean from the best.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

LIST OF TABLES

LIST OF FIGURES

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

ATSI	Additional Targeted Support and Improvement
CSI	Comprehensive Support and Improvement
CSI-LG	Comprehensive Support and Improvement (Low Graduation)
CSI-LP	Comprehensive Support and Improvement (Low Performance)
ESSA	*Every School Succeeds Act*
NCLB	*No Child Left Behind*
SEA	State Education Agency
TSI	Targeted Support and Improvement

CHAPTER 1: INTRODUCTION

Since the No Child Left Behind (NCLB) legislation of 2001, accountability for student achievement has been an important element in defining the success of schools nationwide. The *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA) replaced NCLB in 2015. According to the American Youth Policy Forum, "ESSA provides state education agencies (SEAs) with tools to strengthen accountability and improve school performance" (Kannam & Weiss, 2019, p. 2). ESSA designates schools that are not performing adequately. Under ESSA, states now identify three categories of low-performing schools: Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) schools, which have very low overall performance or poor high school graduation rates; Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI) schools; and Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI), which were identified due to underperforming subgroups of students (Center on Education Policy, 2019). The use of test scores and graduation rates has become the criteria to determine the difference between high performing and low performing high schools.

Federal law requires high schools with graduation rates lower than 67%, or schools that meet other criteria for low performance, to be subject to intensive improvement strategies. This legislation covers all public schools, including campuses that differ from the regular or traditional school setting, such as alternative schools or alternative education campuses. Understanding how these campuses differ from the traditional school setting is important when determining criteria for success. Alternative schools serve students who have unique needs that generally cannot be met in a traditional school setting. These schools typically serve 'at-risk' students who are often chronically absent, over-age and under-credited, as well as those who are re-engaged or have numerous disciplinary infractions (Kannam & Weiss, 2019). Alternative

schools that have an assigned school number are included in ESSA and held accountable to its criteria. Understanding how high school alternative school administrators in North Carolina perceive current accountability standards impact their school can assist in determining if there is a need to examine further how alternative schools are measured in terms of school success.

School administrators need to create environments where successful practices lead to increased achievement and performance. Leadership is second only to classroom instruction as an influence on student learning (Louis et al., 2010). Alternative school administrators are not exempt from these expectations for student achievement under ESSA. Alternative school administrators are responsible for using the same criteria for school success and graduation rates as their counterparts in traditional schools. Added labels attached to schools by ESSA and school accountability guidelines may add to stigmatizing and characterizing alternative education campuses as bad or unsuccessful schools. Holding alternative schools to the same criteria as traditional school settings may not be the means by which to give an accurate picture of success or school performance. This study sought to understand the perceptions of alternative school administrators in North Carolina regarding accountability measures and the impact, if any, of these measures on them and their campuses.

Background of the Problem

National and state accountability systems assign labels to define school performance. States assigning a letter grade (A, B, C, D, or F) to schools on publicly available school report cards became popular throughout the United States over the last two decades (Howe & Murray, 2015). Although many states placed labels that were more ambiguous on schools before the A-F system, a failing label now carries a nearly universal understanding of meaning, along with a greater ability to stigmatize schools (Figlio & Rouse, 2005).

ESSA gives all schools a School Performance Grade (SPG) to identify low performing schools. Beginning in the 2017-18 school year and at least once every three years, ESSA requires states to identify a statewide category of schools for Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI), Targeted Support and Improvement (TSI), and Additional Targeted Support and Improvement (ATSI). CSI schools have very low overall academic performance or poor high school graduation rates, while TSI and ATSI schools are identified due to underperforming subgroups of students (Center on Education Policy, 2019). Alternative schools are not exempt from the ESSA model, which sets forth parameters to identify low performing schools. While North Carolina has developed an accountability system specifically for alternative schools, most schools identified as CSI or TSI are classified as alternative or non-traditional schools (North Carolina State Board, 2018).

Table 1

School Designations Under ESSA

Designation	Definition
CSI –Comprehensive Support and Improvement	Includes a) the lowest performing 5% of schools in a state that receive federal Title I funds and b) high schools that fail to graduate two-thirds of their students
TSI –Targeted Support and Improvement	In these schools a subgroup of students is consistently underperforming, as identified by the state
ATSI –Additional Targeted Support and Improvement	In these schools the performance of any one subgroup of students on its own would lead to the school being identified as CSI

Source: Sections 1111 (d) and (c) of ESSA, as amended.

Alternative schools exist to serve a unique population of students. In North Carolina, alternative schools provide services for students at risk of truancy, academic failure, behavior problems, and/or dropping out of school. Students at-risk of failing may be referred to alternative settings as a means of completing high school. The role of these alternative placements has changed from being a place for students with learning differences to a place for students with behavior problems, or a place for students in danger of dropping out of school (Lange & Sletton, 2002). The performance measures as outlined in ESSA may not provide an overall picture of this category of school concerning its effectiveness.

While it is important to evaluate both alternative and traditional schools to determine their performance and effectiveness, using appropriate measures is essential. Traditional high schools use measures such as academic achievement and graduation rate as factors for success. Alternative schools also look at these factors; however, other characteristics might also be considered because many students on these campuses are behind academically and not on track to graduate. Effective alternative schools typically attempt to offer a caring environment, low student-to-staff ratio, flexibility, and opportunities for relevant experiences (Lange & Sleeten, 2002).

For alternative education to support all students, administrators must ensure that they make the necessary accommodations and modifications regarding time requirements, methods of teaching, and academic setting (Morley, 1991). Currently, these factors and characteristics are not considered when determining the success of alternative schools. These additional aspects may help determine if alternative schools are providing services that help at-risk students with remaining engaged with school and earning a high school diploma.

The role of the principal is important in creating a campus culture conducive to student achievement (Edmonds, 1979; Leithwood, 1994). With a population of students who are often behind academically, student achievement levels may be low and alternative school administrators may elect to focus on other factors to help students increase their engagement with school and lead to high school graduation.

Purpose

ESSA accountability measures can further stigmatize alternative schools as low performing and negatively characterize the school and students served. Research indicates there are some specific characteristics that alternative schools or programs can use to determine and increase their effectiveness. The purpose of this qualitative study is to investigate the perceptions of high school level alternative school administrators in North Carolina regarding the impact of ESSA's performance standards on them and their campuses.

Research Questions

The research questions guiding this study are:

RQ1: How do you as an alternative school administrator in North Carolina perceive ESSA labels used for school performance and their impact on your school?

RQ2: What impact, if any, do these school performance standards have on you both personally and professionally?

RQ3: What do you, as the school leader, perceive to be the most important strategies you have implemented on your campus that might lead to successful outcomes for your students?

Overview of Theoretical Framework

Collins and Stockman (2018) wrote, “A theoretical framework is the use of a theory (or theories) in a study that simultaneously conveys the deepest values of the researcher and provides a clearly articulated signpost or lens for how the study will process new knowledge.” (p. 2). This qualitative research study uses critical theory as its framework. Critical theory analyzes competing power interests between groups and individuals within a society and identifies who gains and who loses in specific situations (Leavy, 2014). When compared with traditional schools, alternative schools are more likely to be identified as low performing and deemed ‘losers’ based on ESSA criteria.

The research used an interpretivist approach, which assumes we cannot separate ourselves from what we know. “Interpretivist tradition portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex, and ever-changing. What is of importance to know, then, is how people interpret and make meaning of some object, event, action, perceptions, etc.” (Glesne, 2011, p. 8). The way alternative school administrators perceive ESSA performance standards will be based on their experiences and understanding. These provide a unique perspective that will assist administrators in understanding how school performance grades affect them and their school. This qualitative study can help determine how current national accountability measures are perceived to impact alternative education administrators in North Carolina and their campuses, and if those school leaders perceive a need to incorporate additional factors as accountability measures.

Research Methodology: Design and Rationale

The purpose of this study is to investigate the perceptions of alternative school administrators in North Carolina concerning the current performance standards under ESSA, and

the impact, if any, of these standards on them and their campuses. A qualitative approach was used for this study. Unlike quantitative research, a qualitative approach to research involves gaining understanding of actual life situations and then applying the findings to the chosen problem (Creswell & Poth, 2018).

Data was collected for this research study using open-ended questionnaires and interviews. Interviews were conducted through Zoom or Google Meets, as in-person interviews were not an option due to COVID-19 safety protocols. While face-to-face interviews have the advantage of social cues such as the voice, intonation, and body language of the interviewee, these cues can give the interviewer additional information beyond verbal answers (Opdenakker, 2006). They were not possible.

To have data to answer the research questions, there was a need for authenticity from the study participants. Participants remained anonymous to assist with achieving authenticity. A qualitative study using a questionnaire with open-ended questions and an interview allowed the researcher to obtain authentic answers from the participants in hopes of creating data to support the themes developed (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Strong data in a qualitative study from various sources strengthened the validity of research (Yin, 2018). Permission to conduct these interviews was granted by the University of North Carolina at Charlotte Institutional Review Board.

Significance of the Study

A disproportionate number of schools labeled as low performing are alternative settings. The October 2018 North Carolina State Board of Education meeting identified 77 schools as CSI-Low Performing (CSI-LP). These are Title I schools whose overall School Performance Grade is in the lowest 5% of all such schools. Of the 77 schools represented as CSI-LP, 11 schools serve students in grades 9-12. Nine of the 11 schools represent non-traditional settings.

Forty-two high schools were identified as CSI-Low Graduation Rate (CSI-LG), meaning schools with a graduation rate of 66.7% or less. Of the 42 schools identified as CSI-LG, 36 represent non-traditional school settings or schools for Exceptional Children (EC); students with behavioral needs (NCDPI Accountability Services website, 2018). In North Carolina, 85% of schools identified as Comprehensive Support and Improvement schools serve students who are enrolled in alternative or non-traditional settings. The labels have changed from letter grades, but the stigma associated with the designation remains intact. The research study explored and analyzed the perceptions of alternative school administrators regarding accountability measures and sought to understand how these measures impact them and their campuses.

Accountability in education is necessary to ensure schools are increasing achievement for all students and can provide support where needed. Alternative education settings serve a specific population of students who have been unsuccessful in traditional settings. These programs and schools tend to have lower test scores and graduation rates because the students they serve have different needs and challenges. All schools, whether traditional or alternative, need accountability measures to ensure the responsible handling of student education.

The question is whether ESSA gives an accurate picture of school success for alternative education settings. The significance of this work aims to aid in determining if there is a perceived need by administrators to redefine accountability in alternative education settings using criteria other than academic achievement based on test scores and graduation rates. It is also important to understand any perceived impact of these accountability measures on alternative school administrators in North Carolina and their campuses.

Data from this study could be used in a broader conversation about federal legislation related to accountability for alternative education settings that considers more than academic

achievement and graduation rate. This study may also provide a means for alternative education administrators to share their perceptions concerning accountability for alternative education sites and options for how to determine their impact on their students.

Delimitations and Assumptions

This study was delimited by considering only alternative school administrators in North Carolina who serve students in grades 9-12. Alternative education administrators who serve students in grades K-8 were not included in this study because graduation rate is not included in their accountability model. This study assessed administrators' perceptions of the accountability for alternative campuses serving high schoolers.

This study was also delimited to alternative school administrators serving in schools that have received a CSI designation using ESSA guidelines. While all alternative administrators have perceptions of the accountability model, this study focused only on those who were in schools currently designated as low performing or as having a low graduation rate.

Assumptions for this study were that participants understand the accountability model that prescribes CSI and TSI labels. In addition, it assumed that participants accurately described their experiences with alternative education and ESSA, and were honest and truthful in their responses concerning their perceptions concerning school accountability and its impact on them personally and professionally, and their campuses.

Summary

Chapter 1 gave an introduction and framework that will guide this study. The chapter consisted of the background of the research, theoretical framework, and the research questions. Chapter 1 also introduced the purpose of this qualitative study, which is to investigate the perceptions of alternative school administrators in North Carolina regarding ESSA's

performance standards and the impact of these standards on them and their campuses. The significance of this study, included in Chapter 1, provided key elements to substantiate the remaining chapters.

Chapter 2 is a literature review that explores scholarly writings regarding alternative education, the role of alternative education administrators, school accountability, and accountability for alternative schools in North Carolina. The literature examined provides further understanding and insight into the research topic. Chapter 3 describes the methodological approaches and techniques that were used to select subjects, collect data, and analyze it.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Introduction

Alternative schools serve students who have disengaged from school or left before graduating. The ESSA performance labels often identify these schools as low performing and needing assistance. Knowledge of alternative schools and their history can provide a foundation for understanding their function in North Carolina. Further, this literature review gives an understanding of their accountability and the role of school administrators.

Alternative Education

Historical Perspective

Offering an alternative to traditional public education is not a new concept. From the late nineteenth century to the early 1920s, vocational education gained momentum with a focus on meeting the needs of students, instead of focusing on college entrance (Emery, 2000). By the 1950s, almost 90% of children between five and 19 were enrolled in public schools (Tyack, 1995). However, not all students responded to these academic and vocational opportunities. According to the U.S. Office of Education, many worried about these 'low ability' students and thought they would contribute to juvenile delinquency (Emery, 2000). Alternative education started in the late 1950s as a private response to the needs of youth who were failing in urban public schools and were introduced in suburban areas as innovative approaches to learning (Caroleo, 2014). This supports Raywid's (1999) notion that the first public alternative schools were found in urban and suburban areas. Urban alternatives focused on those students who were struggling in the mainstream environment, while suburban alternatives emerged in an effort to search for new approaches to educating students (Raywid, 1999).

However, others believe the modern alternative school movement began in the 1960s, due to frustrations with the inequities of public schools at that time (Lange & Sleeten, 2002). In addition, there is the belief that this movement took place as a response to political events (Kellmayer, 1995, p. 3). The 1954 decision in *Brown v. Board of Education*, the assassinations of President Kennedy, Robert Kennedy, and the Rev. Martin Luther King, Jr., as well as the Vietnam War and the unequal treatment of women prompted social and political turmoil all affected education (Sagor, 1999).

Lange and Sletten (2002) contended that mainstream education of the 1950s and 1960s was criticized for being racist and designed for the success of a select few. The social problems of the time created educational systems that did not serve all students. A system for certain students was created, and there was a need for an alternate system that served those who did not fit into it.

In the mid-1960s, President Johnson declared a war on poverty and established the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*. With a goal of equity and funding, alternative schools targeting disadvantaged and minority students rapidly emerged (Young, 1990). Schools established during this time took on various forms including ‘free’ schools and ‘freedom’ schools (Raywid, 1994). Free schools reflected the child-centered philosophy of progressive education and were designed to cater to students hindered by public schools (Miller, 2002). Freedom schools were inspired by the civil rights movement and focused on ethnic empowerment and improving educational quality for poor and minority students. Since the 1980s, alternative schools have been developed as an intervention or option for youth who are unsuccessful and/or unhappy in conventional school (Rumberger, 2011). Throughout their history, they have provided options for students and families that differ from traditional settings.

Defining Alternative Schools and Alternative Education

Not all alternative education campuses are the same. They may differ in their function and the students they serve. However, they all create options to allow students to move towards the goal of high school graduation. According to Barr (1981), over 150 different types of schools have been referred to as alternative. He noted that regardless of the different types of alternative schools that exist, the purpose was to meet the learning needs of diverse students. Despite the ongoing challenge to characterize alternative schools, Raywid (1994) argued that there was agreement on two long-standing characteristics. First, alternative schools were created to meet the needs of students who struggled in the regular school environment. Second, the curriculum and programming of alternative schools were not conventional or traditional.

Raywid identified three types of alternative schools. Type I schools are considered popular innovations. These schools "seek to make school challenging and fulfilling for all involved" (p. 27). Type I schools tend to resemble magnet schools or schools with thematic programs. These are popular choices with students and parents. They are the clearest examples of restructured schools (Hawley, 1991).

Type II schools are 'last chance' programs to which students are sent before expulsion. These schools focus on behavior modification with less attention to curriculum (Raywid, 1994). Gottlieb and Polirstok (2005) claimed that successful behavior management is critical for successful academic instruction. Academic instruction is not possible without this component. Type III schools are remedial. These schools focus on students who need academic and/or socio-emotional remediation or rehabilitation. They operate on the premise that once students find success, they will return to a traditional school program (Raywid, 1994). There is often an emphasis on the school as a community (Foley & Crull, 1984). Lange and Sletten (2002) pointed

out that alternative schools have been undergoing refinement for 40 years and agreed with Raywid and Barr when they wrote that the reason for alternative schools was to meet the learning needs of at-risk, disenfranchised students.

Alternative Education in North Carolina

States differ in their definition of alternative education. However, most agree that these programs are designed to meet the academic, emotional, and behavioral needs of students who are unsuccessful in traditional schools (Kim & Taylor, 2008). According to the North Carolina Department of Instruction (NCDPI), alternative learning programs and schools (ALPS) are safe, orderly, caring, and inviting learning environments that assist students with overcoming challenges that place them at risk of academic failure. The goal of each program and school in NC, is to provide a rigorous education while developing student strengths, talents, and interests. (NCDPI, n. d.).

In 2005, NCDPI adopted seven standards for effective alternative learning programs. These standards are: a clear mission, leadership, culture and climate, professional development, parent/community involvement, curriculum and instruction, and monitoring and assessment. In addition, NCDPI (2016) gave the following attributes of effective alternative program design:

1. Strong, highly effective, visionary, and supportive leaders.
2. Warm and caring teachers and other staff.
3. High level of student and staff engagement.
4. High expectations for staff and students.
5. Allow staff choice to work in the school/program.
6. Permit student choice to enroll in the program.
7. Designed to provide long-term intervention.

8. Holistic approach in delivering services to students.
9. Small teacher-to-student ratio.
10. Flexible and individualized in their design and delivery of instruction.
11. Sufficient support staff and a comprehensive counseling component.
12. Establish sense of community and family.
13. Safe, orderly, caring, and inviting learning environment is the priority.
14. School-wide standards for conduct, interaction, and engagement, and
15. Fair and equitable policies and procedures that are free from arbitrary and capricious features.

NCDPI stated that if the previous characteristics are present in the alternative setting, the following results should occur:

1. The learning environment will be emotionally and physically safe, orderly, and caring.
2. An increase in student achievement will take place, as measured by state and local accountability requirements.
3. More parental input and involvement.
4. A reduction in dropout, suspension, and expulsion rates.
5. An increase in student attendance and graduation rates.
6. A lower teacher/student ratio.
7. Students are able to make successful choices.

In order to engage at-risk students, there need to be an alternative learning environment. Replicating the traditional model is unlikely to produce success. Instead of replicating compliance models of education that have not worked for these students, research showed that

more inclusive and flexible learning approaches are required (Raywid, 2001; te Riele et. al, 2017). Guerin and Denti (1999) added:

> To be effective, alternative education must adapt to the uniqueness of the setting, the transitory nature of the population, and the characteristics of the youth. To this extent, effective alternative education is 'special,' that is, it responds to the unique needs of groups of students, in unusual surroundings (p. 77).

Schools define alternative education programming, as well as how student needs will be addressed (Atkins & Bartuska, 2010; De La Ossa, 2005; Raywid, 2001; Tissington, 2006). Research suggests that alternative programs created to meet students' needs are more likely to produce students who are successful and graduate. Leary (2011) asked former students to compare their alternative and traditional school experiences and found that they felt more prepared after graduating from an alternative school. These schools may be the last opportunity before students decide to leave school without a diploma (Pang & Foley, 2006).

To protect instructional time in classrooms, many traditional schools have isolated or excluded disruptive students, often placing them in alternative learning programs in order to limit their impact on the majority of students (Raywid, 1994; Kim & Taylor, 2008). Alternative schools often benefit traditional schools by serving these disruptive and underperforming students (Kim & Taylor, 2008).

Alternative Education Students

Understanding the uniqueness of students served by alternative education is important to this research study. These students are often referred to as at-risk. This term often reflects students who have not succeeded academically in their traditional setting, and often drop out

(Stowitschek, 1998). These students typically display a lack of interest in school, often have poor attendance, and low standardized test scores. In addition, “they tend to have low socioeconomic status, live in urban environments, be transient, and represent non-native English speakers and minority groups” (Smith, 2011, p. 124). Students found in alternative schools were unsuccessful in their traditional schools, as shown by poor grades, truancy, and behavior problems. They were labeled as having a high risk of dropping out (Foley & Pang 2006; Kleiner et al., 2002; Morrisette, 2011).

Kleiner et al. (2002) reported that the most frequent reasons for student referral to an alternative school from a traditional setting were academic failure, truancy, and behavior. At-risk students are usually low academic achievers who exhibit low self-esteem (Donnelly, 1987). Many of these students face significant personal roadblocks that prevent them from doing well in school, including overworked or absentee parents, emotional problems, and drug and alcohol abuse (DeAngelis, 2012). According to Kauchak and Eggan (2008), students considered at-risk are in danger of failing to exit their education with the necessary skills to survive in modern society.

Research has shown that abandoning long-term goals is a characteristic of the lives of many students enrolled in alternative high schools (Halpin, 2003; Micelli, & Critiano 2010; O’Connor, 2006; te Reile 2007, 2009, 2010). The future to some of these students might seem bleak. “If a student has no hopes and dreams, how can education be meaningful to them? What would be the point if there were no goals?” (Hendershott, 2009, p.22). Hendershott (2009) suggested that what lies under the surface of poor academic performance of alternative school students is a wounded student without hope.

Alternative education has evolved, and research shows there is a need for interventions to address the specific needs of at-risk or alternative education students. These students have typically faced more severe challenges than have their more successful peers. As educators seek solutions to the issues facing alternative school students, a case has been made in the literature from various qualitative studies that suggest lack of hope may be at the root of academic failure in alternative school students (Aron, 2009; Halpin, 2003; te Reile, 2010). Halpin (2003) has written that the basis of alternative school placement is "hopelessness" (p. 28). Providing an alternative to traditional education may be what makes the difference for alternative school students. "Alternative education rests on the notion that traditional public education does not sufficiently address the intensive needs of at-risk student populations" (Edgar-Smith & Palmer, 2015). According to the *Policies and Procedures for Alternative Learning Programs and Schools* of the NCDPI (2016), an at-risk student is "a young person who, because of a wide range of individual, personal, financial, familial, social, behavior or academic circumstances, may experience school failure or other unwanted outcomes unless intervention occurs to reduce the risk factors" (n.p.).

These various factors encompass and give a picture of many at-risk youth who typically comprise the population of an alternative school. Understanding who they are and how they might interpret their situation can assist in understanding the strategies needed that differ from those in traditional schools but are necessary for developing effective programming that leads to student success and effective school programming. The programming needed to re-engage at-risk students may need to take priority over academics at the outset to ensure achievement, as evidenced by test scores or graduation rates.

School Accountability

As it pertains to public education, accountability is "the idea of holding schools, districts, educators, and students responsible for results" (Editorial Projects in Education Research Center, 2004, p. 1). The most important responsibility of state accountability systems should be to ensure that schools and districts are accountable for increasing the percentage of high school graduates who have the academic knowledge, critical thinking abilities, and career and technical skills they need to be successful after completing their secondary education.

Before the 1970s, accountability was synonymous with responsibility, but has more recently meant that a school's students perform well on high-stakes testing (Behuniak, 2003). Before the 1950s, American public education was riddled with racial inequities. The beginnings of educational policy had a civil rights agenda (Baker, Myers, & Vasquez, 2014). During the early twentieth century, schools were segregated. Due to segregation and unequal funding, it was impossible for black students to receive an education comparable to that provided for white students. The U.S. Supreme Court's landmark decision in *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) ordered desegregation of public schools in America. As black and white students began attending school together, the disparities in educational preparedness became evident. This achievement gap continues to plague the educational system today.

To aid in closing this gap, President Lyndon Johnson signed the *Elementary and Secondary School Act* (ESEA) *of 1965* as part of his War on Poverty (McLaughlin, 1975). This legislation, "offered new grants to districts serving low-income students, federal grants for textbooks and library books, funding for special education centers, and scholarships for low-income college students" (Every Student Succeeds Act, 2017, p. 11). The 2001 reauthorization of ESEA under President George W. Bush, known as *No Child Left Behind* (NCLB) required

increased accountability from schools. Yearly standardized tests measured how schools were performing. Schools were also responsible for publishing annual report cards that detailed their student achievement data and demographics (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

President Barack Obama reauthorized ESEA on December 10, 2015 as the *Every Student Succeeds Act* (ESSA). ESSA has two goals: States must align their education programs with college-and career-ready standards, and extend the federal focus on equity by providing resources for poor students, students of color, English learners, and students with disabilities (Young et al., 2017). The reauthorization offered flexibility to states from some of the law's most cumbersome provisions (Paul, 2016). To qualify for this flexibility, states had to demonstrate that they had adopted college- and career-ready standards and assessments, implemented school accountability systems that focused on the lowest-performing schools and those with the largest achievement gaps, and ensured that districts were implementing teacher and principal evaluation and support systems (U.S. Department of Education, n.d.).

ESSA allows states to establish their own accountability systems to measure and report outcomes of school quality and student success. ESSA requires states to include the following five indicators in their school accountability systems:

- Academic Achievement—Student proficiency on state assessments in math and ELA.
- Additional Measure of Academic Success (for K-8)—Either a measure of student growth or another valid and reliable statewide academic indicator.
- Graduation Rate (High school only)—At a minimum, states must include the four-year cohort graduation rate.

- English Language Proficiency—Progress in achieving English language proficiency for English learners on English language proficiency tests.
- School Quality or Student Success—Any reliable, comparable, and statewide measure that allows for meaningful differentiation in school performance (School Accountability and Performance Grades, 2019).

The federal government requires that North Carolina administer and report results from end-of-grade tests in English and math for students in grades 3-8, and science tests for students in grades 5 and 8. High school students must take, at minimum, end-of-course English II, Math I, Math III, and Biology tests. Testing for English language learners and career and technical education students is also required.

Accountability in North Carolina

Education in North Carolina dates back to the 1700s. The state's Constitution of 1776 directed that "a School or Schools shall be established by the Legislature for the convenient instruction of youth" (NCSBE, n.d.). The state Constitution, adopted in 1868, which was modified from the original and created in accordance with the Reconstruction Acts after North Carolina was readmitted to the Union, clarified North Carolina's stand on providing free education for all children of the state, as well as establishing the first official State Board of Education. It would be more than a century later before accountability became a state mandate. In the 1970s, the State Board of Education's mandate of statewide testing programs was implemented due to concerns about accountability in education (NCSBE, n.d.). Yearly comprehensive standardized tests were developed for grades 1, 2, 3, 6, and 9 to assist in identifying individual student learning needs. Another standardized test was developed for high

school students to make sure that high school graduates possessed the skills necessary for life after high school (NCSBE, n.d.).

As North Carolina prepared for the next century, improvement of public education became a major goal. In 1983, the North Carolina General Assembly increased high school graduation requirements. The 1989 General Assembly approved the *School Improvement and Accountability Act*, designed to give local school systems more flexibility in making decisions in exchange for greater accountability. The *Act* included local plans for school improvement, waivers from state laws and policies, a report card for local school systems to ensure accountability, and a differentiated pay scale for teachers (NCSBE, n.d.).

The Performance-Based Accountability Program was introduced in the 1992 legislative session and approved. In order to improve student performance, the program mandated individual school plans and required that school systems meet performance indicators set by the State Board of Education. The program required the State Board of Education (SBE) to approve student performance indicators and guidelines for developing local school improvement plans, to consider waivers submitted by school systems, and to develop a system of individual school improvement reports for each school (NCSBE, n.d.).

The 1995 General Assembly recognized the need for North Carolina public schools to make additional progress in student achievement. The General Assembly asked the SBE to recommend changes that would make the state's education system more responsive to the needs of the 21st century. In response, the State Board of Education developed the *ABCs of Public Education* in March 1995. The law directed the SBE "to examine the structure and function of the State public school system with a view to improving student performance, increasing local flexibility and control, and promoting economy and efficiency" (NCSBE, n.d).

In the 1996-1997 school year, implementation of the *ABCs* began in grades K-8. The first *ABCs Accountability Report* focusing on school performance was submitted to the SBE. The high school accountability model was implemented in the 1997-1998 school year. In January 1999, the SBE considered recommendations from the NC Committee on Standards and Accountability. These recommendations aligned statewide student accountability standards, or gateways, to school performance under the *ABCs* (NCSBE, n.d.). The policy set minimum standards at grades 3, 5, and 8 because each is considered a 'gateway' to the next level of learning. The gateway from grade 5 to 6 was implemented in 2000-2001. Gateways from grades 3 to 4 and from 8 to 9 was launched in 2001-2002. These gateways required that a student meet local promotion standards as well as achieve test scores at Level III or above on end-of-grade tests in both reading and mathematics. The final gateway, a passing score on an *Exit Exam of Essential Skills,* went into effect with the graduating class of 2005. Focused intervention and retest opportunities were allowed for students who do not meet these standards in grades 3, 5, 8, and 11. The *Exit Exam* was required for high school graduation (NCSBE, n.d.).

Throughout the 1990s, North Carolina received national recognition for its accountability efforts and educational progress. James Hunt, the governor during this time, concluded that, "if North Carolina can lead the nation in education progress, we can lead the nation in education, period." On February 1, 1999, Governor Hunt issued a challenge in his State of the State Address: "Let's commit ourselves to this ambitious goal: By the year 2010, North Carolina will build the best system of public schools of any state in America. By the end of the first decade of the 21st Century, we will be the first in education" (NCSBE, n.d.).

In 2013, the North Carolina General Assembly mandated that the state use test scores, academic growth measures, and other outcome measures to create a simple A-to-F performance

grading system for all North Carolina public schools. The current grading system uses a 15-point scale composed of 80% student proficiency and 20% growth on state tests (NCSBE, n.d.).

North Carolina has been a leader in education and accountability but not without criticism. From the *ABCs of Public Education* in 1996 to the *READY* accountability model in 2012, the NCDPI authored, field-tested, administered, and analyzed nearly all end-of-grade and end-of-course tests. According to the 2016 *Teacher Working Conditions Survey*, 57% of the more than 92,000 teachers who responded to the survey questions did not believe that state-developed assessments accurately gauge students' understanding of state learning standards. (The question was removed from the 2018 survey) (*A-F School Performance Grades*, 2019).

Critics of the accountability system believe school performance grades do not reflect learning in schools, undervalue student growth and other important measures of school quality. Low grades stigmatize the schools that receive them and "are more likely to alienate parents from democratic participation in the education of their children than to promote healthy school involvement" (Howe & Murray, 2015, p. 9). These grades label schools based on the family income of the students served and do not help struggling schools improve. The A-F school grading system relies too heavily on a school's achievement score, which are 80% of the grade, and not enough on a school's growth score (*A-F School Performance Grades*, 2019).

Under current North Carolina state legislation and the North Carolina ESSA plan, schools receive a *School Performance Score* on a scale of 0 to 100, which correlates to an *A-F School Performance Grade*. Grades are based on a 10-point scale. However, an annual waiver allows schools to be graded on a 15-point scale. Total score calculation includes the five required categories of indicators and is weighted heavily (80% of the score) towards achievement indicators which are based on a specific level of achievement at a moment in time. The

calculation also includes a school growth index (20% of the score), representing improvement over time, as measured by the school *Education Value-Added Assessment System* (EVAAS) composite index of growth.

Accountability Systems for Alternative Schools

By some measures, educational attainment is at its highest point ever. National high school graduation rates have risen every year since the U.S. Department of Education first collected them in the 2010-11 school year (*Fast Facts*, n.d.). Yet, ensuring that all students complete high school remains an elusive goal. According to one statistic, over one million high school students each year fail to earn a diploma or its equivalent (*Do Something*, n.d.). This number translates to a national school dropout rate of 5.9 percent. For certain subgroups, though, specifically black and Hispanic students, it is much higher: 6.5% and 9.2%, respectively. Under federal law, high schools with graduation rates that are less than 67%, or meet other criteria for low performance, are subject to intensive improvement strategies. Federal policy allows states to use the same, or different, measures to hold alternative schools accountable for their performance, as is the case with other public schools. However, there is a knowledge gap pertaining to understanding how students navigate the alternative school experience and how effectively the federally required school performance measures assess these schools (Jimenez et al., 2018).

Alternative School Accountability in North Carolina

Alternative schools are designed to improve outcomes of students who often have cumulative academic deficits and need options for completing high school. Accountability is important to ensure students meet graduation requirements and their schools are providing quality education. In order to be effective, a state accountability system for alternative education

must help schools balance keeping students engaged in school in order to move them towards graduation and holding them to high standards.

States should give alternative programs credit within the state's accountability system for re-engaging and retaining students and for achieving key benchmarks toward common graduation and college readiness standards (Almeida et al., 2010). ESSA requires states to provide uniform information about school quality and performance for all public schools in the state. ESSA-based systems heavily weight proficiency on state tests and four-year graduation rates. However, the reason many students attend alternative high schools is precisely because they have fallen behind academically and are at risk of not graduating on time. It is unsurprising and uninformative to report these factors for alternative campuses (Domaleski, 2019).

ESSA does allow states to use the same or different accountability systems for alternative high schools. There are six states, including North Carolina, that have taken advantage of this option (Almeida et al., 2010). Although North Carolina uses an alternate system of accountability, there are still many alternative schools listed as CSI.

According to the NCDPI, North Carolina has developed an *Alternative Schools' Accountability Model* (ASAM) to provide additional accountability information on eligible schools and supplement the School Performance Grade (SPG). SBE policy ACCT-038 established eligibility criteria for participation and the options available for eligible schools. Schools identified by this model continue to be part of accountability reporting and are required to be included in assessment participation reporting. ASAM does not replace ESSA requirements. Under ESSA, all schools receive an SPG for identifying CSI TSI schools. The SPG is reported, as required by ESSA for these schools, but is not included in the state SRC.

The Alternative School Administrator

The role of the alternative campus administrator is not defined adequately in the literature. However, understanding this role and its characteristics of a school administrator can be applied to the alternative setting administrator, to an extent. Increasing achievement is an important factor in all schools. Schools rarely move from low performing to effective and high performing unless the administrator is a strong leader (Leithwood et al., 2004). In addition, alternative school administrators are expected to increase student achievement without regard to the numerous circumstances and challenges they face in schools having the highest needs and at-risk student populations in public education (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003).

There is an increased nationwide emphasis to ensure all students are learning. In creating an environment for academic success for students in alternative settings, administrators should develop, monitor, and enhance faculty skills (DiPaola et al., 2004). School administrators should also promote an inclusive school culture, provide instructional leadership, model collaborative leadership, manage and deliver the organizational process, and build and maintain positive relationships with staff, families, and the community (DiPaola et al., 2004).

Theoretical Framework

Critical theory is a philosophy that involves being critical of the prevailing view of society. In many cases, that means looking closer at beliefs that might favor privileged people (*Critical Theory*, 2014). Critical theory seeks to "make problematic what is taken for granted in culture," and it does so in the interests of "social justice," especially in the interest of "those who are oppressed" (Nichols & Allen-Brown, 1996, p. 226). Critical theory in education questions how our educational system can best offer education to all people. It offers opportunities and understanding of the diverse perspectives of disadvantaged members of society (Freisen, 2008).

When compared to traditional school settings, alternative schools are often seen as disadvantaged due to the student population. In this study, critical theory applies as this investigation questions the use of the same accountability performance standards set for traditional high schools in North Carolina.

CHAPTER 3: METHODOLOGY

The purpose of this research is to investigate the perceptions of North Carolina high school alternative education administrators about current accountability performance standards under ESSA, and their impact on administrators and their schools. The questions guiding this dissertation study are:

RQ1: How do you as an alternative school administrator in North Carolina perceive ESSA labels used for school performance and their impact on your school?

RQ2: What impact, if any, do these school performance standards have on you both personally and professionally?

RQ3: What do you, as the school leader, perceive to be the most important strategies you have implemented on your campus that might lead to successful outcomes for your students?

Methodology

Critical theory was used in this qualitative research study as a guide to analyze the perceptions of high school alternative school administrators regarding school accountability measures. According to Horkheimer's definition, a critical theory is adequate only if it meets three criteria: it must simultaneously be explanatory, practical, and normative. That is, it must explain what is wrong with current social reality, identify the actors to change it, and provide both clear norms for criticism and achievable practical goals for social transformation (Bohman, 2021).

The current reality provides the context for the issue related to ESSA, as it relates to alternative schools. Alternative schools serve students who, for a variety of reasons, tend to be behind in credits and have other factors that make high school completion a challenge. Based on

North Carolina data, more alternative and non-traditional schools are labeled as low performing. These labels do not consider other factors that may lead to successful outcomes and further stigmatize alternative schools as 'bad' schools.

There are multiple players who can impact change. Alternative administrators have a voice in sharing their perceptions of how ESSA impacts their school. While states can develop alternative accountability options, federal labels are still required. A State Education Agency (SEA) can lobby for measures to be developed for alternative schools, especially those that are serving students who have been unsuccessful in traditional settings. Achievable practical goals include federal consideration of additional factors for determining the effectiveness of alternative schools, as well as adding specific language in the law concerning alternative schools.

An interpretivist perspective provided the lens to gain greater understanding of the administrator's perceptions of the federal accountability standards. This paradigm allows the researcher to explore in further depth individual experiences through informal discussions and interviews. Additionally, interpretivism is more sensitive toward individual meanings and contributions. It supports research that is more focused on the specific topic and prevents research from heading towards more generalizations (Husam & Abernathy, 2020). While there are experiences that pertain to all alternative school administrators, this study is limited as previously described.

Researcher's Role and Position

The researcher's role in this research includes designing the study and data collection instruments, recruiting participants, conducting interviews, and analyzing data. My positionality within the research draws on my knowledge and experience as an educator with 25 years of experience, which includes time as a teacher, school counselor, and administrator in an

alternative school setting. Over the course of those years, I served as a teacher, school counselor, and administrator in traditional school settings as well. I have also served as an administrator of an alternative school that received a CSI rating due to its low graduation rate.

As a student at North Carolina State University, I imagined that I would work as a middle or high school science teacher. The summer before my graduation, I had an opportunity to work with at-risk youth between the ages of 14 and 18. These young people were enrolled in a Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) Program. While enrolled, they learned job skills, social skills, participated in field trips, and were placed in a job. My role was to serve as their supervisor. This included traveling to visit them at the job sites, teaching math, reading skills, job skills, and social skills; taking field trips, and even firing them when they stole from the vending machine on their work site. It was an interesting summer for a 22-year-old, but very fulfilling. In August of that year, I began working as a substitute teacher. In November, I was asked to work again with JTPA, this time in an alternative school setting. My role was to teach math, reading, and job skills in an alternative high school.

After teaching for five years, I became the school's first counselor and stayed for an additional three years. This is when I fell in love with alternative education and the students. I spent the next 10 years in traditional school settings as a counselor and assistant principal. My first principal position took me back into alternative education. I served in this role for six years. Although I no longer work in alternative education, it remains an area of great interest. When the ESSA accountability system of CSI, TSI, and ATSI labels was established, I was the administrator of an alternative school that received a CSI label due to low graduation rate.

Although I no longer serve in an alternative school setting, I know the feeling of having a school labeled using criteria that is pervasive in alternative school settings. In my experience, it

was rare to have a student who was on track for high school graduation. Even options such as credit recovery would at best bring most students to within a semester or two of graduating 'on time.' I enrolled many students who were transient. Often, a student would return to the school only to move again. This made it difficult to earn credits towards graduation. However, once a student is enrolled for 10 school days, he or she will be counted in the school's accountability numbers. Students who enroll and stay for a short time are counted in the cohort graduation rate unless they enroll in another school.

The LEA in which I served consisted of traditional high schools that averaged graduating classes of 150-250 students. At my small alternative school, my graduating class might have 25 students, often fewer. If nine of those students left school at any point and did not enroll in another school, or if they were in school but too far behind to meet their expected graduation date, my school would not meet the expected graduation rate of 67%. A larger traditional high school always has a better likelihood of meeting the 67% graduation rate.

My school received a grant to assist with moving out of CSI status. I hired a graduation coach, spent money on professional development for teachers, purchased technology, developed a campaign to keep students in school and get them on track towards graduation, and collaborated with our local community college and employers to help students plan their future after high school. I also worked with liaisons from the NCDPI to determine ways to increase the graduation rate.

I was successful in helping students get on track for high school graduation. We worked a great deal on behavior modification in order to create positive change and used multiple research-based strategies designed to create an effective alternative school. We maintained a focus on academics to keep students engaged in school. When students were successful and

proved they could maintain their behavior, academic performance, and were on track to meet their graduation requirements on time, we sent them back to their home or traditional high school. Those students would no longer count towards my alternative school graduation rate; they were part of the graduation class at their traditional school. The students who remained in my school, either did so by choice, or because they had not yet met the criteria to leave.

By most standards, we were a successful alternative school. However, accountability measures said otherwise. My district accountability director shared that being labeled as a CSI school would be inevitable, not just for my school, but for many alternative schools. At the time, there was no indication of what would happen if a school remained in CSI status after the three-year cycle. The accountability director, along with others in her position, were looking at how to keep this from happening. One thought was to have all students in the alternative setting remain enrolled as students in their home or traditional school but take classes at the alternative school. If all students remained enrolled at their traditional setting high school, the alternative school no longer had a school number and therefore was not subject to the accountability measures. Students would receive the alternative school experience, without being enrolled in an alternative school. A graduating class of 150 could have nine students not graduate on time and still maintain a 94% graduation rate.

My experience in alternative education gave me first-hand knowledge of accountability and assisted me in making meaning from the responses of the participants in this study. I am comfortable with the research topic, and this allowed for in-depth exploration of the interview questions.

One possible disadvantage based on my positionality was the need to understand that research participants' experiences may not mirror my own experiences. They had unique

experiences and perspectives. As the researcher, I had to ensure that my experiences do not impact data collection or analysis.

Protecting Participants and Ethical Considerations

The study was approved by the institutional review board (IRB) at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte and follows all institutional data security protocols. To assure and maintain quality, recorded interviews were transcribed and pseudonyms assigned to participants. Interviews were conducted using Zoom. Video files were deleted immediately following the interview. Audio files were destroyed at the completion of this research study. Data was saved on a password-protected computer used only by the researcher. Participant names, emails, and phone numbers were kept in a separate folder from the transcribed interviews. Participants had the option to stop the interview for any reason at any time. Any identifiers, such as schools and locations, were erased during transcription.

To validate the authenticity of the data, member checking was used. This process allowed participants to be emailed a copy of their transcript for their approval. Member checking results in the overall "description, analysis, and interpretation of the culture sharing group" (Creswell, 2013, p. 197). Participants could change their transcribed comments to better represent their responses to the questions. Participants were asked to share any within one week of receiving the transcription. There was only a need to respond if edits were necessary. No participants requested edits to their transcribed interview. Information obtained from the questionnaire was kept in an electronic file on a password protected computer used only by the researcher. All data and participant information will be deleted at the conclusion of this study.

Risks and Benefits to Participants

There are no foreseeable risks to participants. However, the researcher was prepared to rephrase the question, or ask the participant if a break was necessary or a need to end the session if at any time during the interview there is an appearance of distress through gestures or verbalized response. In addition, care was used to avoid identifying research participants based on their responses. The researcher removed any personal information from the questionnaire or during the interview that might identify a participant. The reflection participants will do as part of this study hopefully created the opportunity for participants to narrate their experiences and verbalize the influence their work has on the students and school community they serve.

Sampling Techniques

Purposeful sampling was used for this research. Participants were selected based on their school receiving a CSI label. The school did not need to meet a specific size. Seven administrators who met the criteria responded to the questionnaire. Only four of the seven moved to the next phase to participate in the interview. Purposeful sampling was most appropriate for this study in order to gain data to answer the research questions. It involved identifying and selecting individuals who were knowledgeable about or had experience with the subject of interest (Creswell, & Plano-Clark, 2011). In addition to knowledge and experience, Bernard (2002) noted the importance of being available and willing to participate and having the ability to communicate experiences and opinions in an articulate and reflective manner.

The participants were licensed school administrators who are currently serving in an alternative high school in North Carolina. They serve in alternative schools that were identified as CSI based on federal accountability standards during the 2018-19 school year. The participants in this study have served as school administrators in North Carolina in a range from

13 to 29 years. Their service as administrators in an alternative school ranges from four to eight years.

Information was shared with potential participants through email that detailed the research study and criteria for participation. The consent form was shared with participants electronically as part of the questionnaire. Before participants could complete the questions, they had to read the informed consent information and sign electronically. Their electronic signature served as confirmation that the informed consent information was read and understood. Potential participants could choose to proceed with answering the questionnaire and participating in the interview.

Participants were selected using the following criteria:

- The participant has served or is currently serving as an administrator in an alternative high school.
- The participant has served as a school administrator in North Carolina for at least three years.
- The participant served or is serving in an alternative school that has been identified as CSI based on federal accountability standards.

Research Site

The questionnaire was provided by email and submitted to the researcher. The semi structured one-hour interviews took place via Zoom conferencing. To avoid distractions and assist with ensuring privacy, interviews took place in a quiet space. No in person interviews were conducted.

Data Collection Techniques

Potential participants were identified using information from NCDPI that provided a list of schools designated as CSI. Thirty-four alternative high schools were identified as CSI. Information about the study and criteria for participation was sent to 27 alternative school administrators. Seven schools were not contacted. Three of those schools were in a district that had a research process that was not conducive to the timeline for the completion of this study. The remaining four schools did not provide enough information to make contact. Either there was no administrator listed or there was inadequate contact information. Seven administrators completed the survey; however only four responded to participate in the interview portion of the data collection process.

To effectively capture the data, interviews were recorded using the Zoom video conferencing platform. Recording the interview makes it easier for the researcher to focus on the interview content and the verbal prompts, and also enables the transcriptionist to generate a verbatim transcript of the interview (Jamshed, 2014).

Instrumentation

An electronic form was used for the questionnaire. This instrument contained three questions used to acquire demographic information to ensure participants meet the required criteria. Additionally, the questionnaire includes two questions to provide information about the administrator's experience and knowledge of the ESSA accountability standards. There was one open-ended question to access the administrator's definition of success for the student's they serve and was a precursor to the interview. Qualitative surveys can help a study at its outset by determining issues and experiences to be explored further during the interview. It will be important to develop a survey that is clear. Improving surveys by using appropriate font size,

ordering items logically without creating unintended response bias, and arranging items clearly on each page can increase the response rate to electronic questionnaires (Ponto, 2015).

A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized to answer the research questions. Semi-structured, in-depth interviews are extensively used as an interview format. These types of interviews are conducted once, with an individual or a group and generally last 30 minutes to over an hour (Jamshed, 2014). This structured instrument was designed for this study in an open-ended format. The interview protocol began with the researcher sharing the purpose of the research study and a reminder that no personal information would be reported. Recordings did not begin until participants provided verbal consent. The questions allowed for specific knowledge to be shared to assist with answering the research questions. The questions also allowed opportunity for reflections on the impact of accountability. Follow-up questions were added as needed in order to gain more insight and deeper understanding.

Data Analysis Plan

The recorded semi-structured interviews were transcribed and analyzed in order to identify similarities and differences. The Scribe Transcription service was used for transcribing the data. The data obtained from interviews was initially coded to search for themes and patterns. Saldana (2016) defined a code in qualitative inquiry as a "word or short phrase that symbolically assigns a summative, salient, essence-capturing, and /or evocative attribute for a portion of language-based or visual data" (p. 4). The initial coding that emerged from the participants' transcripts, resulted in numerous codes that were grouped and linked through axial coding. Nvivo was used to assist with developing and organizing themes that emerged from the data

Cross-interview analysis was used to determine if there were themes that emerged across interviews. A process of open coding was used to organize the data. Axial coding extends the

analytic work from the initial coding and assists with describing a category's properties such as conditions, interactions, and consequences of a process (Saldana, 2016). After initial coding, the data will be re-read, and will be used to identify quotations related to the research questions. Codes and sub-codes that do not offer a significant contribution to answering the research questions were collapsed in order to arrive at the most relevant findings. However, these codes can still be used to offer insight for further research.

Research Ethics and Trustworthiness

Approval from the University of North Carolina at Charlotte IRB was obtained before any potential participants were contacted. To ensure quality data, interviews were recorded using the Zoom platform, transcribed using Scribie, and read by the researcher. The use of member checking enabled participants to inspect the transcript and offer corrections if needed. In addition, participants were informed they could take a break or end participation at any time during the interview, if desired. The researcher consulted with advising faculty to seek feedback and approval throughout the study.

Limitations

This study does have limitations. The level of knowledge of the administrators participating in the study differed due to their experience with ESSA making the process of developing themes from the data more difficult. Another limitation of this study relates to the possibility of participants not being fully honest in their answers to the questionnaire or during the interview. I endeavored to ensure honesty but did not have control over this aspect. Lastly, the way participants perceived themselves and their schools did differ, which affected the themes found in the data.

Summary

This chapter included the sampling and recruitment process. North Carolina administrators were recruited based on their school's classification as CSI based on the accountability standards, in addition to their answers to the survey questions which determined they met the criteria for participation. This chapter also included ethical considerations, and study limitations. Chapter 4 will present findings on the research questions as its organizational framework. Critical theory was used as the lens to examine the research questions and support the findings based on the data collected. Chapter 5 will discuss the study's findings and implications for further research.

CHAPTER 4: FINDINGS

ESSA accountability measures can further stigmatize alternative schools as low performing and negatively characterize the school and students served. Research indicates there are some specific characteristics that alternative schools or programs can use to determine and increase their effectiveness. The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of high school level alternative school administrators in North Carolina regarding the impact of ESSA's performance standards on them and their campuses. The research questions guiding this study were:

RQ1: How do you as an alternative school administrator in North Carolina perceive ESSA labels used for school performance and their impact on your school?

RQ2: What impact, if any, do these school performance standards have on you both personally and professionally?

RQ3: What do you, as the school leader, perceive to be the most important strategies you have implemented on your campus that might lead to successful outcomes for your students?

Participants

Criteria for participation in this study required that the participant has served or is currently serving as an administrator in an alternative school, has served as an administrator in North Carolina for at least three years, and has served or is currently serving in an alternative school that has been as identified as CSI based on federal accountability standards. Four alternative high school administrators completed the survey and scheduled an interview. While a small sample of alternative high school administrators, they represent three of the eight educational regions of the North Carolina Department of Instruction. The schools they serve vary

in their purpose and approach to alternative education. They provide a glimpse into the multiple ways alternative education can be delivered. The remainder of this chapter provides insight into each participant, and the findings from the data analysis to answer the research questions. Table 2 provides demographic information about each participant. Pseudonyms are assigned to each participant. The table provides the total number of years each has served in education, the number of years as a school administrator, and the number of years each has been an administrator in alternative education. Participants are principals of an alternative school that was labeled CSI in the 2018-19 school year.

Table 2

Description of Participants

Participant	Years in Education	Years as a School Administrator	Years as an Alternative School Administrator
John	29	20	8
Bob	19	13	6
Jessica	29	18	4
Aaron	36	16	4

Interviews were conducted using the interview protocol developed by the researcher. Questions began with the participant sharing information about their alternative school and the students they serve. The questions then moved to ESSA and its impact on their school and on them personally. The interview ended with participants sharing final thoughts about ESSA and strategies they use to help their students find success.

John

John is a Caucasian male, is principal of an alternative school in the Southwest District of North Carolina, and has a doctorate in Educational Leadership. He was the principal of his alternative school when it received the CSI label in the 2018-19 school year. When asked how well he understands the ESSA accountability standards and labels on a scale of 1 to 5 (1="I have little or no understanding" and 5="I am very knowledgeable"), John rated himself a 5. He describes his school as a dropout prevention center that can serve a maximum of 125 students. Students who enroll in his school must have a clear path to graduation and have a minimum of 12 credits towards graduation. Students are enrolled in five classes each semester and can earn a minimum of 10 credits in one school year. When asked if he believes his school will exit the CSI designation, John said,

> Yes, we are here because our dropout rate fell. We want to make sure we have a path to graduation for students. Doing this will help. There are some students I can't take because I can't graduate them. If I take five kids that don't graduate, that's going to drop my [dropout] percentage.

John was also asked how he defines success for the students he serves, he shared, graduating students and maintaining a safe, productive and inviting environment.

Bob

Bob is a Caucasian male serving as principal in an alternative school in the Northwest Region of North Carolina. He holds an Education Specialist degree and served in the military before beginning his career in education. Bob was the principal of his alternative school when it received the CSI label in the 2018-19 school year. When asked how well he understands the ESSA accountability standards and labels on a scale of 1 to 5, Bob rated himself a 4. He shared that his school serves students in grades 6-12. He has about 60 students enrolled, with 31 in high

school. At this time, more than 50% of students enrolled in his school have significant mental health concerns. The rest are a combination of some "straight up behavioral, refusal to do things, and attendance issues. Then we have a couple of students who have been assigned here due to drug offenses." Bob describes his school as being trauma informed and is working to help his staff focus more on understanding how the brain works. When asked if he believes his school will exit the CSI designation, he said, "I do see us exiting at some point. I don't see it happening this year, but I do feel like it will happen." Bob was also asked how he defines success for the students he serves:

> Success is demonstrated by students at our school who learn and exhibit the skills and abilities necessary to develop and practice a healthy lifestyle, to live physically and emotionally safe lives, and understand and employ academic and behavioral tools and resources to graduate from high school prepared for further studies, employment, and participation as a productive citizens in our world.

Jessica

Jessica is a Caucasian female who serves as principal at an alternative school in the Piedmont Region of North Carolina. She holds a Master's degree in School Administration and this is her first principal position. Jessica was the principal of her alternative school when it received the CSI label in the 2018-19 school year. When asked how well she understands the ESSA accountability standards and labels on a scale of 1 to 5, she rated herself a 4. Jessica has a school that serves approximately 700 students and has three locations in her district. She was proud that her schools do not look like schools. They are located in old office buildings or strip malls. She shared that her students have not been successful in traditional school settings and that it is alright to come to a place that does not necessarily look like a school. Her school is two

schools in one. One serves re-engaged students who have dropped out or may do so. This is an asynchronous school using online classes, but students are required to report to campus one day each week. Teachers are responsible for case management and ensuring they do their virtual assignments.

The other school serves students who are reassigned to her campus due to disciplinary infractions. These students are typically assigned for one semester or one school year and attend school in a virtual situation where teachers are "live teaching" classes each day and students log in to these classes. Students have four classes on a block schedule each day. When asked if she believes her school will exit the CSI designation, Jessica said, "Never. We will never get off of it." When asked how she defines success for the students she serves, she shared that it was graduating from her school or successfully transitioning back to their base school and graduating.

Aaron

Aaron is an African American male who serves as principal of an alternative school in the Southwest Region of North Carolina. He holds a Master's degree in School Administration. Aaron was not the principal of his alternative school when it received the CSI label in the 2018-19 school year. When asked how well he understands the ESSA accountability standards and labels on a scale of 1 to 5, he rated himself a 2. There are three components to his school: a middle school program, a high school program, and a Twilight School. Students in the Twilight School attend from 5:00 PM to 7:00 PM. Aaron describes his school as a place of possibilities where students are taught they can be successful in life. There is a strong focus on academics and providing experiences for students. Students are enrolled in his school through a long-term suspension process or through a placement committee managed by school and district staff. When asked if he believes his school will exit the CSI designation, Aaron said,

> Wow. Honestly, not right now. It's just hard because we don't have them [students] consistently enough to do and provide all the support academically that they need, and then you throw in the trauma and the issues that we have to contend with out in the community; not right now.

Aaron was also asked how he defines success for the students he serves. He shared that it is when learners feel accepted and safe in the school community and their learning needs, social capital, emotional and mental health needs are being met, and sustainable job skills for a successful future are being created.

These four schools represent alternative learning programs and schools that have received the CSI designation in North Carolina. Each school has their own focus and operates differently. This sample does provide a variety of alternatives for students in the state of North Carolina. As Jessica shared,

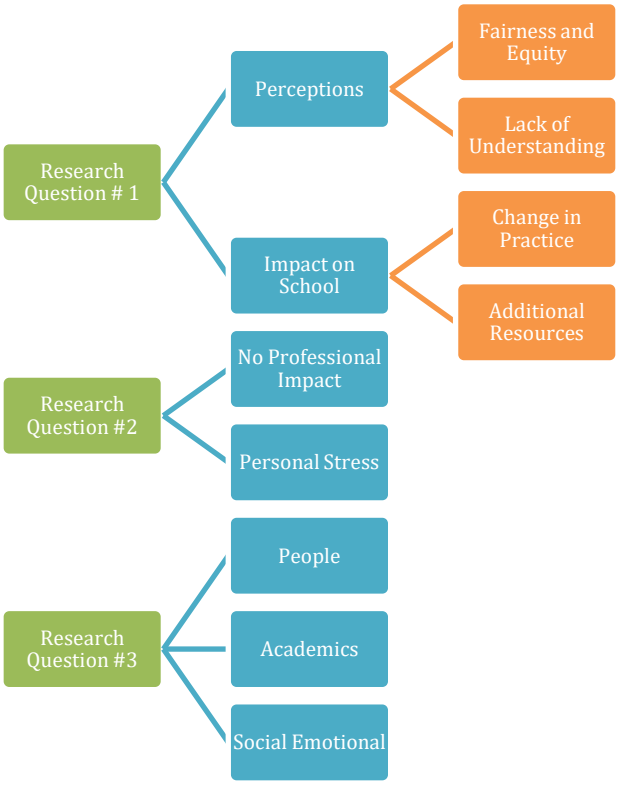
> When people say traditional school, everybody knows exactly what that is. And when people say a magnet school, everybody pretty much knows what that is, but with the varying and options of alternative school; it leaves lots of room for what the heck is it that you do?

These participants represent some of the variety found in alternative education and provide the unique nature of alternative schools.

Themes and Findings by Research Question

Two to three themes emerged from each research question. A summary of the themes derived from the three research questions are shown in Figure 1. The following sections provide more details about the themes.

Figure 1
Themes Related to Research Questions



Research Question 1: How do you as an alternative school administrator in North Carolina perceive ESSA labels used for school performance and their impact on your school?

Participants' responses provided many common perceptions, insights, and themes. The first research question set out to investigate alternative high school administrator perceptions of the ESSA labels used to determine school performance and to understand the impact of these labels on their schools. To fully answer this question, themes were developed around the administrators' perceptions of the ESSA labels. Next, themes were developed to help gain insight into the impact of these labels on their school.

Perceptions

In an effort to gain insight into administrator perceptions, questions were asked that investigated the thoughts surrounding the ESSA labels and the information these labels provide.

Analysis of the data resulted in two themes relating to perceptions. These themes were fairness and equity, and lack of understanding.

Fairness and Equity

The issue of fairness was common throughout data received from all participants. John shared, "It pisses me off. It's not fair." He went on to say,

> I am trying to help kids graduate and I am being penalized for doing what we are created to do. I have to look more carefully at the students who come to my school. If I am to get out of CSI, I can't take every student. We have to know they have a clear path to graduation.

Similar sentiments were shared by other participants. Bob shared,

> We are expected to work miracles in a short amount of time. Alternative is alternative and we can't be measured by a single test. They [ESSA guidelines] are driven off test standards. One snapshot for a couple of hours does not give the complete picture. Students come with mental health issues, below grade level, and with attendance issues. And we're expected to have good test scores.

Jessica described the ESSA guidelines as providing a disservice. "It's a disservice to the school system and community to have this label. It's unfair to my staff." Aaron shared, "This model really does not do us justice. There are better ways to see our success." Aaron stated, "The model really does not do us justice. There are better ways to see our success."

Participants also perceive the comparison to traditional schools as unfair. Six states, including North Carolina, have developed alternative school accountability models (Almeida et al., 2010). This, however, does not negate the federal ESSA guidelines for school accountability that label many alternative schools in North Carolina as CSI. John shared,

> We are viewed from a traditional school lens and we have a completely different environment. There's all sorts of outside issues that are affecting the students. We bring them in here and try to make it a real community; support them anyway we can.
>
> Bob shared similar thoughts around the comparison to traditional school settings: They are looking at the simplest, most inexpensive way to measure what is considered traditional success. There is nothing traditional about what we do in an alternative setting. Alternative is alternative and can't be measured by a single test.

Bob also shared that his school system has developed standards that are used to present information about his school to the school board and community to assist with understanding his school and seeing our success based on attendance, discipline referrals. "There is more of a focus on academic growth instead of proficiency." No other administrators shared local standards used to present information about their alternative programs.

Aaron noted, "If our students were college and career ready, the current accountability system could work. With the issues our students come with we are comparing apples to oranges."

Lack of Understanding

Participants perceived a lack of understanding by those who develop the guidelines for accountability about the students served on alternative campuses. Bob shared,

> 50% or more of the kids in this building are dealing with significant mental health issues, and then the rest are a combination of some straight up just behavioral refusal to do things, attendance issues. And then we have a couple of students who have been assigned here for drug offenses. We can't get to academics until we take care of the social-emotional needs.

Aaron also shared that many students on his campus are "transient and dealing with trauma; many have mental health issues. Many students are not used to structure" He also said students arrive behind academically and have "cognitive lags… we are constantly playing catch up." Jessica said,

> We officially call them re-engaged students, for students who have either dropped out of high school or are looking like they potentially could drop out of high school, or who just have mitigating factors in their home lives that prevent them from attending a traditional school. They have not been successful in the traditional setting. Many students are considered McKinney-Vento (homeless); they couch surf and don't have a stable place to live.

John shared that his students "have not adjusted well socially. They need more than the traditional school could give them. Then we are penalized for trying to help them."

The participants perceived those who are making the decisions do not understand the students or the needs of the students served on their campuses.

Impact on School

Research question 1 also asked about the impact of ESSA guidelines on their school. In order to gather information from participants, questions were asked regarding any changes made as a result of receiving the CSI designation. Two themes were developed through the data analysis: Change in practice and additional resources.

Change in Practice

Although participants do not perceive the ESSA labels to be helpful, they have made some changes on their campuses as a result of receiving the designation. The majority made changes to their instructional practices. John shared that there is a better environment for

students instructionally: “We went from an Ingenuity based (all online) for all of our courses to a more blended environment. Teachers developed Canvas courses. Now students are getting direct instruction from teachers instead of an all online approach.” Bob shared that there is more focus on academics at his school. He also shared,

> I am informing my teachers more about what’s happening with the CSI designation so they understand the importance of the changes being made when it comes to instruction or anything else. I want teachers to understand the changes are not just to make changes. We all have a part to play in moving our students and our school forward.

This is the opposite of what Jessica does with her teachers. She said, “I don’t tell teachers a lot of this stuff. I just work in the background and carry on.” She shared the way her school sites are set up, an online format works best and they have not made any changes instructionally.

Aaron shared:

> More focused on data and understanding exactly where students are in order to know their needs academically. I am a more distributive leader and work to build trust. So distributive leadership with limits so teachers can grow. We have a good team. We developed teacher-led design teams instead of leadership teams or school improvement teams, but it still serves the same purpose. We have impact or data meetings so teachers can see where students are and hold us accountable. We know we want to make a difference in closing the achievement gap and cognitive lags. We are creating more learning centers built on the humanities and STEM.

Bob is also in the process of changing his school to move towards a focus on trauma: “We have spent about four years working on a trauma-informed syllabus for staff and training for the students and teaching them about how their brain works.” He added:

> In addition to a school counselor, I also have a mental health counselor. We have a therapy dog with us this year for a couple days a week. We are excited to make some changes with the social-emotional side of the house. Understanding this world will drive how well things can go in the academic world.

Additional Resources

According to each participant, one positive result of receiving the CSI designation was the funding that came from the state. All schools labeled as CSI received funding through a grant opportunity. Each participant was able to obtain resources that would not have been possible without this grant funding. Jessica shared that with this funding, her school has been able to provide more transportation for students to get to school:

> There is no transportation to my sites. Students have to get here on their own. With my funding I'm going to buy some contracted service; I'm going to pay for transportation to get my kids here so parents aren't burdened with getting them to us."

John used the funding to hire an additional position. He stated

> With the money we got a Comprehensive School Improvement Coordinator Position, I hired a girl from Charlotte who was at their alternative school there. She brought in some ideas that helped us a lot. It's kind of opened my eyes a bit; there are different ways of doing this. So we see a difference. I compare the instruction this year to versus two years ago. It is a better environment for the kids now instructionally. Before we were looking at getting them through the classes and now there's more focus on learning the standards all through. We also were able to bring in the National Dropout Prevention Center to do trauma informed training with our staff. So, we did get the

> Trauma Skilled School designation. The money I got from that was something I've never had access to before. So that's one good thing that comes out of it.

Aaron said

> Additional resources have been used to provide experiences for our students so they can see what learning is about in the real world. Before Covid, we were eating it up and just going and seeing different experiences from aerodynamics and going to Charlotte to participate in theater where the kids wrote plays and performed at least three nights; taking them on college visits just so they can see. Providing opportunities for them to work. Horticulture, we have a greenhouse now. We have an art class; actually, tomorrow, they have pure white Vans shoes that they will paint to display.

Research Question 2: What impact, if any, do these school performance standards have on you both personally and professionally?

Research questions attempted to understand the impact of the school performance standards on administrators from a professional and personal viewpoint. To gain insight, questions were asked regarding professional opportunities being enhanced or hampered, as well as their own thoughts and experiences. Analysis of the data resulted in two themes: no professional impact and personal stress.

No Professional Impact

None of the participants felt the CSI designation of the school they are leading would impact their career personally. Although Bob was not concerned about himself, he shared the following:

> If the current mindset continues at the state level, I'm certain professional aspirations could be harmed. I come into this building with a different attitude cause I already retired

> from the military. So if you guys want to move me or mentor me, I'm ready to retire. That's not gonna bother me one bit. But I think in order to get some young leaders into the building, any building, that will impact the quality of people that will want to come to the job.

Jessica shared,

> When we first got the designation, it did scare me a lot because I'm like we will never get out of this. Then I thought, this is why I'm here; this is what I do. If anybody in the educational world were to say that [this designation would harm my career], then I would worry about them."

Aaron shared,

> I don't think this can harm me professionally because I have a good track record in regular education. At my last school we went from low performing to exceeding growth. My last four years we exceeded growth, teachers were getting bonuses; I was getting bonuses. I was kind of looking at my next move potentially a high school principal. But they wanted me to look at this [alternative school] and I was up for the challenge. I gave up a lot. I think it's purposeful that I'm here, but if a good opportunity would come available that I think would fit my skill set to make a difference in a middle or high school, I'd probably look at it.

John also did not see any impact on his professional career. He shared, "I don't see that. I didn't even know about the CSI designation or ESSA designations until I was told that I had it."

Personal Stress

The participants perceived there is a personal impact that comes with working in alternative education and having the CSI designation. John pointed out, "Pisses me off. How do

you measure the good we're doing? This is frustrating and I don't need all this extra scrutiny." Bob echoed similar sentiments, "It's like a shot in the face. It's hard to be positive when everything is focused on the negative. The good things happening are overlooked." Bob also shared that he recently experienced medical issues as well. "This has created pressure that placed me in the hospital with heart issues; there is definitely stress and pressure. But it is truly a calling to work in alternative education." Aaron shared, there is definitely stress. I have 34 years in and I have thought of retirement; I'm eligible and have talked with HR. But there is an internal drive that keeps me going. I have to believe in hope."

Research Question 3: What do you, as the school leader, perceive to be the most important strategies you have implemented on your campus that might lead to successful outcomes for your students?

The aim of research question 3 was to understand the strategies participants used on their campuses to help move their students to success. The three themes that emerged from data analysis were people, academics, and social emotional.

People

Participants believe part of creating success for their students involves those connected to these students. Linking with families was an area participants believe helps to provide successful outcomes. Aaron shared that communicating with families is important to the work he does. "Communication with the family is so important. We have monthly meetings with parents to review student's SMART goals, attendance, and behavior; students are included. These discussions allow us to make adjustments as needed." He went on to say:

> The partnership between school and home helps to keep students more engaged. I have several students who are in group homes. We keep the group home staff engaged with

students just as we do with biological family members. It's something about students knowing they have a support system; not just home and not just school, but everybody working together for them makes a difference. Some families are not as engaged with their students, but we create this accountability for students and for their families. Sometimes there are families who don't need to be involved because of the family dynamics. We ask the student who they want involved in their meeting. It just makes a difference.

Jessica discussed the importance of home visits:

> One strategy that helps our students find success is our ability to make connections. That home visit connection with parents and families is probably one of our bigger things. It is important to have access to social services and to have a good social worker.

Bob mentioned family connections, however, he emphasized making connections with students. "Establishing positive rapport with students is one strategy that helps create success. We spend time getting to know our kids." He also discussed getting to know students and understanding their patterns:

> I had one child I was speaking with today. Every Monday, he comes in, and despite the fact that his mom swears up and down that he's gotten eight or nine hours of sleep; every Monday, he needs to come in, get settled in. And he's gonna try and take a nap for a little while, and he's trying to go home. Well, I've come to find out after we've started figuring the pattern out that he's got community service on Monday afternoons after school. So, if he gets out of school then he can skip community service. So, it's taking the

time to figure out those little nuances which I think will help us in the long run with helping our kids, so we're spending time doing that.

Aaron also talked about getting to know students. He shared one of his strategies is:

> Getting to know students and meeting them where they are. We want students to know we are here for them. If their goal is to return to their home school, we are going to help them reach their goal and continue to show support.

John also talked about the importance of staffing:

> It is important to have the appropriate support in place for students; there has to be enough staff. Some people say we're overstaffed, but the needs of students here are much greater. We need the staff to cover everything. You see a lot of the places, a lot of the alternative schools they're just dumping grounds for teachers, and we don't have that here, we've got very good staff. You have to have the right leader in place.

Academics

During the interviews, academic strategies and interventions were emphasized as ways they are assisting their students with finding success. Jessica noted the flexibility there is with the curriculum. "There is a freedom that alternative brings with curriculum and being able to teach outside the course of study. This helps to engage these disengaged students." Jessica also used an online approach with the majority of her students: "My teachers case manage students to help ensure they stay on track academically. Aaron discussed the importance of "meeting students where they are academically in order to personalize learning":

> We are very intentional about this. We take time to do testing and observations to help us know where students are and what they need. We create expectations for students that say you're here to learn. We are not a diploma mill.

Social-Emotional

All participants acknowledged the importance of focusing on social emotional learning as a strategy they use to help create success. John shared, "you have to have the right staff in place that understands the emotional needs of the students." This statement also speaks to the theme of people. He also provided professional development for his staff to become a trauma informed school. As shared previously, John was able to use the funding he received to also receive the same designation. A success strategy that Jessica shared focused on restorative practices:

> We have our staff trained in Restorative Practices. My staff has been trained in Circles. We used this a great deal before the pandemic and we are excited to get back to this. This helps with getting kids to communicate; learn to talk about what they're feeling instead of just reacting. Aaron shared strategies related to social emotional learning. Students develop SMART goals to help them think about what they want academically and socially. The goals help to keep students focused and working towards accomplishing something. We celebrate as they complete goals. This is part of how we meet students where they are and build those relationships with students.

In addition to what Bob had already shared about the trauma focus and professional development for his staff, he added:

> We have students journal. They are encouraged to keep a daily journal. We also have students keep what we call a life binder. This is one place to keep everything they need to know where they are academically and know the other life goals they are working

towards. This is a resource students can use in class or when meeting with a counselor.

We were fortunate to hire a mental health counselor in addition to our school counselor.

Summary

Chapter Four provided information about the participants and findings from the data organized by research questions and themes. Findings indicate that NC alternative school administrators perceive the ESSA accountability guidelines are unfair and inequitable, and that those who create the guidelines lack understanding of alternative schools and the students they serve. The findings also show administrators perceive no impact on their professional career, but perceive additional personal stress in their lives. Findings further indicate the perception that the people who assist and are involved in the lives of students, their academic and social-emotional interventions, appear to be the most important strategies that can lead to successful outcomes for their students.

Chapter Five will discuss and interpret the findings to answer the research questions. This chapter will also include connections to the theoretical approach, limitations of the study, implications from the findings, as well as recommendations for future research based on the findings from this study.

CHAPTER 5: DISCUSSION

Introduction

The purpose of this qualitative study was to investigate the perceptions of high school level alternative school administrators in North Carolina regarding the impact of ESSA's performance standards on them and their campuses. This study had four participants who were alternative high school administrators of schools that has been labeled CSI due to low performance and/or low graduation rate based on ESSA guidelines. Participants were selected using purposeful sampling. Each completed a questionnaire and was interviewed via Zoom. Interviews were transcribed using an online program, Scribie. To check for accuracy, the researcher listened to each interview and read through the transcripts multiple times. NVIVO software was utilized to assist with coding and revealed findings for the study's research questions.

The researcher conducted this research to gain insight into the perceptions of alternative high school administrators regarding the ESSA accountability standards and to contribute to the broader conversation about federal legislation related to accountability for alternative education settings, and considers more than graduation rates and current performance standards. This chapter will summarize, interpret, and discuss the findings, as well as consider their implications for alternative education. The chapter will conclude with recommendations for further research.

Summary of the Findings

The following findings resulted from this research:

Research Question 1: Alternative high school administrators perceive the ESSA guidelines used for school performance as unfair, inequitable, and a demonstration of the lack of understanding of alternative education. The question also asked about the impact of these labels

on their schools. The findings showed that they impact resulted in changes in practice and additional resources for their campuses.

Research Question 2: Alternative school high school administrators perceived personal stress is a result of these school performance standards. They also perceived these standards have no impact on their professional career.

Research Question 3: These school leaders perceived the strategies that are most important and could lead to successful outcomes for their students are the people involved with students, academic interventions, and social emotional interventions.

Interpretations of the Findings

RQ1: How do you as an alternative school administrator in North Carolina perceive ESSA labels used for school performance and their impact on your school?

The study's findings showed a perception that ESSA guidelines were unfair, inequitable, and demonstrated a lack of understanding of alternative education. Additionally, the findings showed there is a belief that the impact of these guidelines resulted in changes in practice and additional resources for their campus.

All participants perceived ESSA guidelines as unfair because alternative learning environments differ considerably from traditional schools. There is a belief that traditional measures for accountability do not fairly determine the success of alternative schools. Critical theory is a philosophy that involves being critical of the prevailing view of society. In many cases, that means looking closer at beliefs that might favor privileged people (Study.com, 2014). When compared to alternative schools, traditional schools are seen as privileged. The accountability standards were created with them in mind. Alternative schools are expected to fit this mold, although the findings show there are differences that create inequities arising from

ESSA guidelines. All participants felt frustration due to the guidelines and their use in designating their school as CSI. They have also worked in traditional school settings and understand the differences between the settings and the students served.

All participants perceive a lack of understanding regarding the type of students served on their campuses. Many of these students face significant personal roadblocks that prevent them from doing well in school, including having overworked or absentee parents, emotional problems, and substance abuse (DeAngelis, 2012). The perception was that those who created the standards do not understand the obstacles and issues that many alternative school students face. Despite their students' mental health issues, attendance problems, and cognitive lags, the participants must meet the same standards as their traditional school peers. Many students come to alternative education settings behind in several areas and have not been successful in their traditional school environments. Those who created the standards do not take these circumstances into account and therefore, these alternative school administrators believed there is a lack of understanding about the students who are in alternative schools.

Although these participants perceive the ESSA accountability standards to be unfair or inequitable, three of the four have made changes in their practices since receiving the CSI designation. Participants have enhanced their academic programs and changed their leadership styles. Schools rarely move from low performing to effective and high performing unless the administrator is a strong leader (Leithwood et al., 2004). These participants were committed to their students and their success to the extent that, while perceiving the accountability standards to be unfair, they were developing strategies to help meet ESSA criteria. The participants saw their work as creating the best possible environments for their students and believed the changes made

will create better outcomes for their students. The CSI designation led these administrators to think about their schools in different ways and change some of their practices.

All participants made use of resources provided as a result of receiving the CSI designation. Receiving this designation made all alternative schools and their districts eligible to receive grant funding. These principals took advantage of this opportunity by providing staff professional development, hiring additional staff, and putting strategies in place to enhance student experience. The study's findings indicated that the participants were able to use this funding to assist with initiatives they believed were important for their students and campuses. This is one positive that came from having the CSI designation.

RQ 2: What impact, if any, do these school performance standards have on you both personally and professionally?

The findings indicated that those in this study perceived no impact on their professional career or opportunities to advance. Most have enough years in public education to be close to retirement and had a successful record as school leaders. Bob did share that although there was no impact on him personally, the accountability standards could deter young leaders from working in alternative education if they desire to remain and grow in the field.

There are significant responsibilities for any school leader, but those in alternative education have additional challenges. Alternative school administrators are expected to increase student achievement without regard for the unique circumstances and challenges they face (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003). Knowing they will be evaluated on the same criteria as traditional school administrators could deter young leaders from entering alternative education.

Findings also indicated there is consistent personal stress in these administrators' lives. One participant shared that he dealt with significant health issues related to the stress of his

work. Some have considered retirement as an option and they deal with the frustration of having the CSI designation. School leaders desire to be successful and there is a lot of pressure on any school leader, but all the more on those seeking to improve outcomes in alternative settings.

RQ 3: What do you, as the school leader, perceive to be the most important strategies you have implemented on your campus that might lead to successful outcomes for your students?

There are strategies that participants used on their campuses to increase opportunities for success for their students. These strategies are related to people who work with students, academic interventions utilized, and a focus on the social-emotional needs of students. Alternative school students often deal with issues that are infrequent in traditional school settings. The interventions provided can help move students to successful outcomes. School administrators should promote an inclusive school culture, provide instructional leadership, model collaborative leadership, manage and deliver the organizational process, and build and maintain positive relationships with staff, families, and the community (DiPaola et al., 2004).

Recommendations

The findings from this study suggested that alternative high school principals in North Carolina perceive the ESSA accountability standards as unfair and inequitable. The first recommendation, therefore, is to gain information from more alternative high school administrators in the state to see if these perceptions are consistent. Having served in this role, the researcher believes similar data will be found concerning these accountability standards. The participants provided insight that can be helpful to legislators who determine the accountability guidelines.

Other recommendations are:

- Gain additional understanding ofthe differences between alternative school campuses and traditional school campuses.
- Take into consideration the challenges that alternative school students often bring with them to school each day.
- Consider the current accountability standards may not fairly describe the work of alternative schools.
- Bring alternative school administrators into the conversation as accountability standards are developed.
- Create a separate accountability model that considers the unique characteristics of most alternative schools.

Critical theory in education questions how our educational system can best provide education to all people. It offers opportunities and an understanding of the diverse perspectives of disadvantaged members of society (Freisen, 2008). The findings from this research could continue the conversation about the perceptions of ESSA and its impact on alternative school administrators and their campuses. It could also assist legislators in developing accountability standards that acknowledge the special circumstances while providing accountability for alternative schools.

The findings from this research also indicate there could be negative consequences for alternative schools and the students who can benefit most from the services they provide. Although the administrators in this study do not see any harmful impacts of the ESSA labels on their career, they could, however, hinder new talent from seeking administration positions in these schools. The administrators in this study had numerous year of experience and were not concerned about future opportunities and advancing in their career. Administrators new in their

careers may not want to consider alternative schools who have the added pressure of school performance with students who are sometimes the most difficult to serve. Additionally, as alternative school administrators work to ensure they can achieve the appropriate achievement level and graduation rate, there could be some unintended consequences for some students who need an alternative setting. As indicated by one administrator in this study, he has to ensure the students who enroll in his school have a path to graduation that will allow them to graduate with their cohort so the graduation rates at his school are not negatively impacted. Many students who need the services offered on an alternative school campus are not on track to graduate with their cohort. They may also be behind their grade level academically. As alternative schools become more concerned about the ESSA labels, there is a possibility they could become more selective with the students they enroll. If alternative schools become more selective, the most vulnerable students could be left behind creating more obstacles for these teens.

It is important to recognize the possible results the current ESSA standards and labels can have on alternative schools, the students they serve, and those who need the services they provide.

Implications for Further Research

There is much research available on alternative schools and alternative education, as well as growing research about ESSA and accountability measures. However, there is limited research on alternative school administrators themselves. Conducting more interviews regarding the perceptions of alternative school administrators can increase our knowledge of this subject. Listening to alternative school administrators would help in understanding the impact of ESSA standards on alternative schools and their administrators. Further, including alternative school administrators at the elementary and middle school levels would broaden the conversation, as

well as alternative schools in other states. In addition to conducting research on alternative schools labeled as CSI or TSI, including perceptions from administrators leading alternative schools that have not received these labels will provide more understanding about the impact of CSI and TSI labels on alternative schools.

ESSA accountability standards began in the 2018-19 school year. Research regarding alternative schools that entered the CSI cycle in that school year would be helpful in determining if these schools were able to exit the cycle. Studying how they exited would assist other alternative school administrators.

There is great opportunity for research in this area to gain more insight into the work of alternative school administrators and understand how and why they serve this special population. While interviewing these participants, the passion and purpose behind what they do was evident. Understanding why they serve, and the leadership strategies they use that may differ from traditional school leaders could bring their stories to the forefront and highlight the difficult work they do.

Conclusion

Alternative schools and school accountability are two aspects of education that will remain part of our public educational system. Both play an important role in ensuring students are prepared for life after high school. Unfortunately, the two may not work together to assist all students in an equitable way.

This study sought to explore the perceptions of alternative high school administrators about the impact of ESSA accountability standards on them personally and professionally, and on their schools. The participants in this study represent various types of alternative school environments, but all perceive the ESSA accountability standards to be flawed because they are

based on traditional school settings and do not consider the unique circumstances of alternative school campuses. Critical theory provides a lens through which we can see the privilege provided to traditional schools. Alternative schools, which serve some of the most disadvantaged students, are expected to meet the same standards as traditional school settings.

There is work to be done on behalf of alternative schools and their administrators in order to create accountability standards that do not minimize the extraordinary efforts and accomplishments of alternative school administrators. There is an obligation to ensure every type of school is able to show success in ways that represent who they are and what they do. Accountability is necessary, and should be tailored to ensure the measures are applicable for various school settings.

References

Almeida, C., Le, C., Steinberg, A. & Cervantes, R. (2010). *Reinventing alternative education: An assessment of current state policy and how to improve it.* Jobs for the Future.

Aron, L. (2009). Alternative schooling in the United States. In K. te Reile, (Ed.). *Making schools different: Alternative approaches to educating young people* (pp. 10–19). Sage.

Atkins, T., & Bartuska, J. (2010). Considerations for the placement of youth with EBD in alternative education programs. *Beyond Behavior*, *19*(2), 14–20.

Baker,S., Myers, A., & Vasquez, B. (2014). Desegregation, accountability, and equality: North Carolina and the nation, 1971–2002. *Education Policy Analysis Archives, 22*(117), 1–30. http://dx.doi.org/10.14507/epaa.v22.1671

Barr, R. D. (1981). Alternatives for the eighties: A second decade of development. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *62*(8), 570–573.

Behuniak, P. (2003). *Education assessment in the age of accountability. Measuring up: Assessment issues for teachers, counselors, and administrators*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED480379

Bernard H. R. (2002). *Research methods in anthropology: Qualitative and quantitative approaches.* (3rd ed). Alta Mira.

Bohman, J. (2021). "Critical Theory," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, E. N. Zalta (ed.). https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/spr2021/ entries/critical-theory/

Bryman, A. (2001). *Social research methods*. Oxford University Press.

Caroleo, M. (2014). An examination of the risks and benefits of alternative education. *Relational Child and Youth Care Practice*, *27*(1), 35–46.

Chow, A., Whitlock, M., & Phillip, L. (2011). A catalyst for educational change: The role of career and technical education in Georgia's statewide educational improvement efforts. *Academic Leadership, 9*(1), Article 2.

Ciarrochi, J., Heaven, P. C. L., & Davies, F. (2007). The impact of hope, self-esteem, and attributional style on adolescents' school grades and emotional life satisfaction: A longitudinal study. *Journal of Research on Personality, 41,* 1161–1178.

Creswell, J. W. (2013). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (3rd ed.). Sage.

Creswell J. W., & Plano-Clark V. L. (2011). *Designing and conducting mixed method research.* (2nd ed.). Sage.

Creswell, J. W., & Poth, C. N. (2018). *Qualitative inquiry & research design: Choosing among five approaches* (4th ed.). Sage.

Collins C. S., & Stockton C. M (2018). The central role of theory in qualitative research. *International Journal of Qualitative Methods, 17*:1609406918797475.

Crossman, A. (2020, August). *Understanding critical theory*. https://www.thoughtco.com/critical-theory-3026623

Curtin, K.A., & Garcia, J. (2011). Improving work performance for adolescents with emotional and behavioral disorders: A comparison of two work based learning interventions. *Journal of Rehabilitation, 77*(1), 31–39.

DeAngelis, T. (2012). Helping at-risk students succeed. *Monitor on Psychology, 43*(2), 46–47.

De La Ossa, P. (2005). "Hear my voice": Alternative high school students' perceptions and implications for school change. *American Secondary Education, 34*(1) 24–39.

DiPaola, M., Tschannen-Moran, M., & Walter-Thomas, C. (2004). School principals and special education: Creating the context for academic success. *Focus on Exceptional Children, 37*(1), 1–10.

Do Something (n.d.). *11 facts about high school dropout rates*. https://www.dosomething.org/us/facts/11-facts-about-high-school-dropout-rates#fnref1

Domaleski, C. (2019). *Rethinking accountability for alternative schools. Center for Assessment.* https://www.nciea.org/blog/assessment-systems/rethinking accountability-alternative-high-schools

Donnelly, M. (1987). *At-risk students*. *Service learning, general*. https://digitalcommons.unomaha.edu/slceslgen/305

Drage, K. (2009). Modernizing: Career and technical education programs. *Techniques, 5*(7), 32–34.

Edgar-Smith, S. & Baugher Palmer, R. (2015). Building supportive school environments for alternative education youth. *Preventing School Failure, 59*(3), 131–141.

Edmonds, R. (1979). Effective schools for the urban poor. *Educational Leadership, 37*(1), 15–24.

Emery, K. (2000, July). *Alternative schools: Diverted but not defeated*. http://www.educationanddemocracy.org/Emery/Emery_AltSchoolsPaper.htm

Entwisle, D. R., Alexander, K. L., & Olson, L. S. (2000). Early work histories of urban youth. *American Sociological Review, 65*(2), 279–297.

Eyisi, D. (2016). The usefulness of qualitative and quantitative approaches and methods in researching problem-solving ability in science education curriculum. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1103224

Farquhar, J. D. (2012). *Case study research for business*. Sage. https://doi.org/10.4135/9781446287910

Fast facts: High School graduation rates (n.d.). National Center for Education Statistics. https://nces.ed.gov/fastfacts/display.asp?id=805

Figlio, D. N., & Rouse, C. E. (2005). *Do accountability and voucher threats improve low performing schools*? National Bureau of Economic Research. http://www.nber.org/papers/w11597

Foley, E. M., & Crull, P. (1984). *Educating the t-risk adolescent: More lessons from alternative high schools*. Public Education Association.

Foley, R., & Pang, L. (2006). Alternative education programs: Programs and student characteristics. *The High School Journal*, *89*(3), 10–21.

Friesen, N. (2008). Critical theory: Ideology critique and the myths of E-learning. *Ubiquity 9*(22): Article 2. https://doi.org/10.1145/1403922.1386860.

Gatto, J.T. (2009). *Weapons of mass instruction.* New Society.

Glesne, C. (2011). *Becoming qualitative researchers: An introduction.* (4th ed.). Pearson Education.

Gordon, H. (2014). *The history and growth of career and technical education in America* (4th ed). Waveland.

Gottlieb, J., & Polirstok, S. (2005). Practical highlights: Program to reduce behavioral infractions and referrals to special education. *Children and Schools*, *27*(1): 53–57.

Gilbert G., & Denti L. (1999) Alternative education support for youth at risk, *The Clearing House, 73*(2*)*, 76–78. doi:10.1080/00098659909600151

Halpin, D. (2003). *Hope and education: The role of a utopian imagination.* Routledge Falmer.

Hawley, W. D. (1991). Public policy and public commitments to enable high school restructuring: Lessons from the high school in the community. In E. J. Trickett (Ed.), *Living and idea: Evolution of an alternative high school*. Brookline.

Hays, D., & Singh, A. (2012). *Qualitative inquiry in clinical and educational settings*. Guilford.

Held, D. (1980). *Introduction to critical theory*. Hutchinson.

Hendershott, J. (2009) *Reaching the wounded student*. Eye on Education.

Howe, K. R., & Murray, K. (2015). *Why school report cards merit a failing grade*. National Education Policy Center. http://nepc.colorado.edu/publication/why-school-report-cards-fail

Husam, H. A. & Abraham P. (2020). *A review of key paradigms: Positivism vs. interpretivism*. *Global Academic Journal of Humanities and Social Sciences, 2*(3), 39–43.

Hutchins, B.C., Akos, P. (2013). Rural high school youth's access to and use of school-to-work programs. *The Career Development Quarterly, 61,* 210–225.

Hyslop, A. (2006). Establishing a clear system goal of career and college readiness for all students. *Techniques: Connecting Education and Careers*, *81*(6), 37–39.

Hyslop, A., & Imperatore, C. (2013). CTE's role in urban education. *Techniques: Connecting Education and Careers*, *88*(2), 16–19.

Jamshed S. (2014). Qualitative research method—Interviewing and observation. *Journal of Basic and Clinical Pharmacy*, *5*(4), 87–88. https://doi.org/10.4103/0976-0105.141942

Jimenez, L., Rothman, M., Roth, E., & Sargrad, S. (2018). Blueprint for accountability systems for alternative high schools. Center for American Progress. https://www.americanprogress.org/issues/education-k12/reports/2018/06/15/452011/blueprint-accountability-systems-alternative-highschools/

Kannam, J., & Weiss, M. (2019, June). *Alternative education in ESSA state plans: A review of 38 states*, 1–27. https://www.aypf.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/06/Alternative-Education-in-ESSA-State-Plans-A-Review-of-38-States.pdf

Kauchak, D., & Eggen, P. (2008). *Introduction to teaching: Becoming a professional.* Pearson Education.

Kellmayer, J. (1995). *How to establish an alternative school*. Corwin.

Kim, J.H. & Taylor, K.A. (2008). An alternative for whom: Rethinking alternativeeducation to break the cycle of educational inequality. *The Journal of Educational Research, 101*, 207–219.

Kincheloe, J.L. (2011). Rethinking critical theory and qualitative research. In K. Hayes, S. Steinberg, & K. Tobin (Eds.), *Key works in critical pedagogy* (pp. 285–326). SensePublishers. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-6091-397-6_23

Kleiner, B., Porch, R., & Farris, E. (2002). *Public alternative schools and programs for students at risk of education failure:2000–01*. http://nces.ed.gov/pubs2002/2002004.pdf.

Kraebber, S., & Greenan, J. (2012). The relationship between self-concept and self-ratings of generalizable skills of students in postsecondary career and technical programs. *Journal of Career and Technical Education*, *27*(1), 15–33.

Kreamer, K. (2014). Career and technical education is the theme. *Techniques: Connecting education and careers*, *89*(6), 20–25.

Lange, C., & Sletten, S. (2002). Alternative education: A brief history and research synthesis. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED462809

Leary, P. H. (2011*). A narrative inquiry of graduates from an alternative rural education program*. (Publication No. 348921) [Dissertation, Capella University]. ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global

Leavy, P (2014). The *Oxford handbook of qualitative research*. Oxford University Press.

Leithwood, K. (1994). Leadership for school restructuring. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *30*(4), 498–518.

Leithwood, K. & Riehl, C. (2003). *What we know about successful school leadership*. http://olms.cte.jhu.edu/olms2/data/ck/file/What_we_know_about_SchoolLeadership.pdf

Leithwood, K., Seashore Louis, K., Anderson, S., & Wahlstrom, K. (2004). *Review of research: How leadership influences student learning.* https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED485932

Leonardo, Z. (2004). Critical social theory and transformative knowledge: The functions of criticism in quality education. *Educational Researcher, 33*(6), 11–18. https://doi.org/ 10.3102/0013189X033006011

Loera, G., Nakamoto, J., Oh, Y. J., & Rueda, R. (2013). Factors that promote motivation and academic engagement in a career technical education context. *Career and Technical Education Research*, *38*(3), 173–190.

Louis, K. S., Leithwood, K., Wahlstrom, K., & Anderson, S. (2010). *Investigating the links to improved student learning: Final report of research findings*. Wallace Foundation. www.wallacefoundation.org/knowledge center/schoolleadership/key-research/Documents/Investigating-the-LinkstoImproved-Student-Learning.pdf

Marsh, H., & Kleitman, S. (2005). Consequences of employment during high school: Character building, subversion goals, or a threshold? *American Educational Research Journal*, *42*(2), 331–369.

McLaughlin, M. (1975). *Evaluation and reform: The Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, Title I*. Ballinger.

Merriam, S. B. (1998). *Qualitative research and case study applications in education*. Jossey-Bass.

Micelli, M., & Cristiano, C. (2010). *The power of wish and possibility*. *Theory and Psychology, 20*, 251–276.

Miller, R. (2002). *Free schools, free people: Education and democracy after the 1960s*. State University of New York Press

Morley, R. E. (1991). *Alternative education: Dropout prevention research reports*. https://eric.ed.gov/?id=ED349652

Morrissette, P. J. (2011). Exploring student experiences within the alternative high school context. *Canadian Journal of Education 34*(2), 169–188.

Murillo, M. A., Quartz, K. H., & Del Razo, J. (2017). High school internships: Utilizing a community cultural wealth framework to support career preparation and college-going among low-income students of color. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk, 22*(4), 237–252, doi:10.1080/10824669.2017.1350182

Neild, R.C., Boccanfuso, C., & Byrnes, V. (2013). The academic impacts of career and technical schools: A case study of a large urban school district. http://new.every1graduates.org/the-academic-impacts-of-career-and-technical-schools/

Nichols, R. G., & Allen-Brown, V. (1996). Critical theory and educational technology. In D. H. Jonassen (Ed.), *Handbook of research for educational communications and technology* (pp. 226–252). Simon & Schuster Macmillam.

North Carolina Department of Public Instruction (NCDPI) (2017). *Public school dropout rate improves in 2015-16*. https://www.dpi.nc.gov/news/press-releases/2017/01/25/public-school-dropout-rate improves-2015-16

NCDPI (2016). *Alternative learning programs and schools: Standards and implementation procedures*. https://www.dpi.nc.gov/ media/808/open

NCDPI Accountability Services (2017). *2017 reports*. https://www.dpi.nc.gov/districts-schools/testing-and-school-accountability/school-accountability-and-reporting/accountability-data-sets-and-reports#2017%E2%80%9318-reports

North Carolina Public Schools (2019). *Consolidated Data Report 2017-18*. http://www.ncpublicschools.org/docs/research/discipline/reports/consolidated/20718/consolidated-report.pdf

North Carolina State Board of Education https://stateboard.ncpublicschools.gov/about-sbe/history

North Carolina State Board of Education *Policy manual*. https://simbli.eboardsolutions.com/Policy/PolicyListing.aspx?S=10399

O'Connor, C. (2006). Race, class, and disproportionality: Reevaluating the relationship between poverty and special education placement. *Educational Researcher, 35*(6),6–11

Opdenakker, R. (2006, August). Advantages and disadvantages of four interview techniques in qualitative research. *Forum: Qualitative social research*. https://www.qualitative-research.net/index.php/fqs/article/view/175/391

Pang, L. S., & Foley, R. M. (2006). Alternative education programs: Program and student characteristics. *The High School Journal*, *89*(3), 10–21.

Patton, M. (2014). *Qualitative research and evaluation methods.* (4th ed.). Sage.

Paul, C. A. (2016). *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965*. Social Welfare History Project. http://socialwelfare.library.vcu.edu/programs/education/elementary-and-secondary-education-act-of-1965/

Ponto J. (2015). Understanding and evaluating survey research. *Journal of the Advanced Practitioner in Oncology*, *6*(2), 168–171.

Raywid, M.A. (1994, September). Alternative schools: the start of the art. *Educational Leadership* 52 (1), 26–31.

Raywid, M. A. (1999, May). History and issues of alternative schools. *The Education Digest*, *64*(9), 47–51.

Raywid, M.A. 2001. What to do with students who are not succeeding. *Phi Delta Kappan*, *82*(8), 582–584.

Rosenbaum, J., Zenilman, J., Rose, E., Wingood, G., & DiClemente, R. (2014). Do jobs work? Risk and protective behaviors associated with employment among disadvantaged female teens in urban Atlanta. *Journal of Women, Politics and Policy*, *35*(2), 155–173. http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/1554477X.2014.890836

Rouse, C. E. (2005, October). *Labor market consequences of an inadequate education*. Center for Educational Equity. http://www.centerforeducationalequity.org/events-page/equity-symposia/2005-the-social-costs-of-inadequate-education/papers/77_Rouse_paper.pdf

Rumberger, R. W. (2011). *Dropping out: Why students drop out of high school and what can be done about it.* Harvard University Press.

Sagor, R. (1999). Equity and excellence in public schools: The role of the alternative school. *Clearing House*, *73*(2), 72–73.

Saldana, J. (2016). Goodall's verbal exchange coding: An overview and example. *Qualitative Inquiry,22*(1), 36–39.

Scott, J. (1978). Critical social theory: An introduction and critique. *British Journal of Sociology, 29*(1), 1–21. doi:10.2307/589216

Smith, S. (2011). Creating safe learning environments for at-risk students in urbanschools. *The Clearinghouse: A Journal for Educational Strategies, Issues and Ideas, 84*(4), 123–126.

Staff, J., & Mortimer, J. T. (2008). Social class and the "school to work" transition. *New Directions for Child and Adolescent Development*, (*119),* 55–69.

Stone, J. R. (2011). *College and career ready: A conceptual framework for increasing engagement, achievement and transition*. Unpublished manuscript, University of Louisville, National Research Center for Career and Technical Education.

Stone, J. (2014). Moving from good to great: Creating a high quality CTE program. *Techniques: Connecting Education and Careers*, *89*(8), 26–31.

Stowitschek, J. (1998). Interprofessional case management for children and youth at risk of school failure. *Preventing School Failure 42*(2), 53–54.

Study.com (2014, August). *Critical theory: Overview & practical teaching examples*. https://study.com/academy/lesson/critical-theory-overview-practical-teaching-examples.html

te Riele, K. (2007). Educational alternatives for marginalised youth. *Australian Educational Researcher*, *34*(3), 53–68.

te Reile, K. (2009). *Making schools different: Alternative approaches to educating young people.* Sage.

te Reile, K. (2010). Philosophy of hope: Concepts and applications for working with marginalized youth. *Journal of Youth Studies, 13*(1), 35–46.

te Riele, K, Wilson, K., McGinty, S., Lewthwaite, B. (2017). Outcomes from flexible learning options for disenfranchised youth: What counts? *International Journal of Inclusive Education, 21*(2), 117–130.

Threeton, M. D. (2007). The *Carl D. Perkins Career and Technical Education (CTE) Act of 2006* and the roles and responsibilities of CTE teachers and faculty members. *Journal of Industrial Teacher Education, 44*(1), 66–82.

Tissington, L. (2006). History: Our hope for the future. *Preventing School Failure*, *51*(1), 19–25.

Tyack, D. (1995). *Tinkering toward utopia: A century of public school reform.* Harvard University Press.

U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.). *What is ESEA?* [Web log comment]. http://blog.ed.gov/2015/04/what-is-esea/

Ward, T. (2013). Critical education theory. http://www.tonywardedu.com/critical-education-theory.

Yin, R. K. (2018). *Case study research: Design and methods* (6th ed.). Sage.

Young, W., T. (1990). Public alternative education: Options and choice for today's schools. Teachers College Press.

Young, M. D., Winn, K. M., & Reedy, M. A. (2017). The *Every Student Succeeds Act*: Strengthening the focus on educational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, *53*(5), 705–726. https://doiorg.librarylink.uncc.edu/10.1177/0013161X17735871

APPENDIX A: EMAIL INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE

Email to Alternative School Administrators serving schools identified as CSI

Greetings _____ (administrator's name),

I am Shannon Clemons, a doctoral student at the University of North Carolina at Charlotte. I am conducting a study on the perceptions of high school level alternative school administrators in regard to current school performance measures under ESSA. I am seeking high school level alternative school administrators who have served or are currently serving in an alternative school that has been identified as a Comprehensive Support and Improvement (CSI) school due to ESSA criteria based on low overall performance or low graduation rates. If you are willing to participate in this study which will include the completion of a questionnaire and one interview, please read and complete the linked questionnaire which includes a consent form. The consent form will provide information regarding the purpose and implication of my study. If you choose to participate, you will sign the consent form electronically and move forward with the questionnaire. Once your completed questionnaire is received, you will be contacted to schedule your interview. If you have questions at any time, please email me at sclemon3@uncc.edu.

Thank you for your consideration,

Shannon Clemons

Privacy Notice: Email may not be strictly confidential

APPENDIX B: RECRUITING FOLLOW UP FOR ALTERNATIVE SCHOOL (CSI) STUDY

Researcher: Shannon Clemons at sclemon3@uncc.edu

Your assistance will be greatly appreciated for my research study regarding high school level alternative school administrators serving schools labeled as CSI under federal accountability guidelines. If you choose to participate, please complete the electronic questionnaire linked below which includes informed consent. Once this questionnaire is complete, we will arrange for an interview. This interview can take place through video conferencing or in-person, whichever you prefer. We will ensure all COVID-19 precautions are followed for in-person interviews. If you have questions or concerns at any time, please contact me at sclemon3@uncc.edu.

Sincerely,

Shannon Clemons

Doctoral Candidate in Educational Leadership

UNC Charlotte

APPENDIX C: QUESTIONNAIRE

Research Study: North Carolina Alternative School Administrator Perceptions of School Performance Measures

This questionnaire will be used to determine if potential research participants meet the requirements necessary to participate in this research study.

Procedure

1. This questionnaire will be shared electronically with the initial invitation to participate.
2. Participants will complete this questionnaire and informed consent in order to move to the interview process.
3. No identifying information will be used in this study. All participants will be identified using a letter system.
4. School names will not be used in this study.

Questionnaire

1. Your name
2. How many years have you served as an educator?
3. How many years have you served as a school administrator?
4. How many years have you (did you) served as an administrator in your alternative school?
5. Were you the principal of your school when it was labeled CSI?
6. On a scale of 1 to 5, with 1 being I Don't Understand at All, how well do you understand the ESSA accountability standards and labels?
7. How do you define student success for students in your school?

APPENDIX D: INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Research Study: North Carolina Alternative School Administrator Perceptions of School Performance Measures

This is a semi-structured interview starting with a few open-ended questions to gain more insight into responses from the questionnaire. The researcher will possibly ask additional probing questions depending on the response of the participant during the interview process.

Procedure

1. The researcher will conduct the interview through an electronic video conference or find a quiet space to conduct an in-person interview depending on the preference of the participant.
2. The researcher will ask if the interview may be recorded whether conducted through an electronic conference or an in-person setting.
3. If the participant verbally provides his/her consent and completed the electronic questionnaire, the recording will begin.
4. The researcher will conduct the interview and ask the questions.

Interview Guidelines

Thank you for completing the electronic questionnaire and agreeing to participate in an interview as part of this research study. The purpose of this study is to understand the perceptions of North Carolina alternative school administrators regarding federal school performance measures. I am going to ask you a series of questions. Your name, nor the name of your school or school system will not be reported. There are no wrong answers, so please answer as freely as you can. You do not need to answer any questions that you do not feel comfortable answering. Later I will transcribe the interview. I will share the transcription to allow you to confirm the data collected is accurate. You will have an opportunity to change any information that is incorrect. If there is any reason that you like to change a response or if you regret a response, you may tell me at the end or anytime during the interview and it can be eliminated from the transcript. You may stop this interview at any time for any reason. Would you like to proceed?

- If no, the researcher will stop the interview and ask whether the participant is willing to be interviewed at another time.
- If yes, the researcher will continue the interview.

Research Questions:

RQ1: How do you as an alternative school administrator in North Carolina perceive ESSA labels used for school performance and their impact your school?

RQ2: What impact, if any, do these school performance standards have on you both personally and professionally?

RQ3: What do you, as the school leader, perceive to be the most important strategies you have implemented on your campus that might lead to successful outcomes for your students?

Foundational questions:

- Tell me about your alternative school. What makes your school a great place for students?
- What is the process used to place students in your school?
- What are some general observations you could make about characteristics of the students enrolled in your school?

RQ1: How do you as an alternative school administrator in North Carolina perceive ESSA labels used for school performance and their impact your school?

- Do you believe the ESSA designations provide equitable information for all high schools in NC? Why or why not?
- What hinders your school from meeting the achievement level to move out of CSI status or what hinders your school from achieving the designated graduation rate to move out of CSI status? (Will tailor the question based on the school designation)
- Does having this CSI designation impact the expectations you have for your staff?
- Have you changed any of your leadership practices since being designated as a CSI school? If so, what changes have you made? If not, why not?
- How has your campus changed since receiving this CSI designation?
- If you could develop accountability guidelines specifically for alternative schools, would you change the current policy? Why or why not? If so, what would be included in the new policy?

RQ2: What impact, if any, do these school performance standards have on you both personally and professionally?

- When was your school designated as CSI? and for what reason?
- As you are working to help your students find successful outcomes, how does it feel to receive an ESSA label that says you're not meeting performance standards?
- Has receiving this designation created stress or pressure for you as the school administrator?
- Do you see your school exiting the ESSA designation?
- Do you believe your professional aspirations can be enhanced or harmed by serving in a school with this CSI designation?
- What are your professional goals?
- Are you concerned a CSI designation negatively impacts your professional career?

RQ3: What do you, as the school leader, perceive to be the most important strategies you have implemented on your campus that might lead to successful outcomes for your students?

- What specific strategies are you using to help students meet their cohort graduation requirements?
- What specific strategies are you using to increase student achievement in your school?
- What other strategies do you employ to promote overall success for your students?
- Have you implemented different strategies since being labeled CSI? If yes, what strategies?
- If you had to select 5 strategies that are most helpful in creating success for your students, what strategies would you select and why?

Wrap up and final comment question

- As an administrator at an alternative school, what do you want policy makers to understand most about your school and the students you serve?
- What final thoughts do you have about school accountability and its impact on your alternative school?
- Is there anything else you would like to share?

Thank you for your time.
Shannon Clemons