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A Mixed Methods Study of Special Education Families' Experiences at an Online Charter School

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ABSTRACT

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Student well-being (as opposed to an overemphasis on learning outcomes or technologies) should serve as the central component of a successful online model for students with disabilities. Historically, research on online schools for students with disabilities has focused on outcomes. One online charter school's growth of the students with disabilities population has outpaced the growth of the general education student population over the past eight years, which is an unusual trend that warrants additional scrutiny. Using anonymous parent and student surveys coupled with in-depth phenomenological interviews, this explanatory mixed-methods study investigates the reasons families of students with disabilities chose online learning at this particular school and what their experiences have been. The findings suggest that parents and students value the learning environment in terms of choosing when, where, and how to learn, and the student experience in terms of safety, support, academics, and teachers. Further analysis suggests the importance of mattering, social safety and connection, open educational resource-enabled pedagogy, and self-determination in providing supportive online learning environments for students with disabilities and their parents. This dissertation can be downloaded at www.delainatonks.com.

Keywords: online learning, students with disabilities, open educational resources, self-determination

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CHAPTER 1

Introduction

Mountain Heights Academy, formerly Open High School of Utah, is a public online charter school whose overall student population has increased annually since it opened in the 2009-2010 school year. In 2017-2018 the school enrolled 624 full-time and 252 part-time students, based on the October 1 data from the Utah State Board of Education pupil accounting reports ("UTREx," 2016). Additionally, the school serves a diverse population across the state with students residing in 32 of Utah's 41 districts (State of Utah, 2016). The growth of the students with disabilities population has outpaced the growth of the general education student population over the past eight years, which is an unusual trend that warrants additional scrutiny.

Since the opening of Utah's first public charter schools in 1999-2000, parents have continued to seek various educational options for their students, as many believed that not all students were best served by the existing public-school system (Lambert, 2017; Lubienski, 2003). Many felt that traditional district schools were too large and systematized to meet the needs of their individual student. In short, parents demanded choice in education (Lambert, 2017; Lubienski, 2003). Flexibility and individualized instruction ranked high on parents' educational desires for their students, according to market analysis surveys conducted by our school's founding board (Open High School of Utah, 2009). Historically online schools have hired hourly employees to mentor and work with students and have reserved their teachers for instruction and grading. Mountain Heights Academy was designed differently. The school hires full-time teachers, attempts to create a culture of continual improvement and collaboration, and encourages teachers to spend their time teaching and connecting with students ("Employee Handbook," 2017, p. 4). When instruction and content are captured digitally and made accessible

to students anytime, it can free up teacher time to work with students in small groups or individually (Watson, 2008).

Around the same time that Utah parents began looking for additional choices in education, the open educational resources (OER) movement emerged with modest success in the early 2000s at institutions like Harvard, the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Yale, and Stanford (MIT, 2001). Several years later the Hewlett Foundation solidified the underlying philosophy of the OER movement:

> At the heart of the movement toward Open Educational Resources is the simple and powerful idea that the world's knowledge is a public good and that technology in general, and the Worldwide Web in particular, provide an extraordinary opportunity for everyone to share, use, and reuse knowledge (Smith & Casserly, 2006, p. 10).

These three factors—the desire of parents seeking flexibility, the development of online delivery systems, and the emergence of the OER movement—inspired Dr. David Wiley (current board member of the online school in the study), an expert in the field of OER, to found an online school by presenting a charter application to the Utah State Charter School Board in 2007 (Esser, 2010). A founding board was also established that same year. These volunteers worked for two years to determine how the school would operate (Open High School of Utah, 2009) by setting its vision, mission, and policies.

The Utah State Charter School Board is tasked with reviewing all proposed charter school applications in the state, and after a two-year vetting process the school opened in August 2009. After establishing state-required policies and infrastructure, the school's governing board hired a principal to implement its mission and vision for the school, which was "to use

innovative technology, service learning, student-centered instruction, and personal responsibility to empower students to succeed" (Mountain Heights Academy, 2016).

Since the school is comprised strictly of secondary level students in grades 7-12, students with disabilities are typically already identified when they enroll in the school because their parents indicate on the registration form that their child has an individualized education program (IEP). There were 79 of 525 (15%) full-time students on an IEP at this school at the time of this study. Occasionally students are also identified as a student with disabilities through child find and the response to intervention (RTI) process where teachers note the discrepancy between ability level and grade level for underperforming students without an IEP. The discrepancy initiates the RTI process to determine if an IEP may be needed. Various interventions are implemented, such as increased time being tutored by the general education teacher or paraprofessional, reduced workload, guided notes, or advanced access to the content. Depending on the outcome of the intervention, the student may be referred for additional testing to provide evidence to receive services under an IEP. Students may then be candidates for tiered instruction based on the assessment results. Tier 1 instruction consists of standards-aligned instruction available to all students. Tier 2 instruction contains strategic supplemental interventions for students identified at some risk who may or may not qualify for special education services, such as students who qualify for a 504 plan (12%). The majority of Tier 3 students are students with disabilities who have been identified as high risk. They receive intensive supplemental interventions (Shapiro, n.d.). This RTI model has been enhanced in recent years by the multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) which encompasses RTI and focuses on systemic alignment with curriculum, instruction, assessment, school culture, leadership, and professional development, among others.

Mountain Heights Academy also serves 225 part-time students, 15 of whom had an IEP as of October 1, 2016. However, the part-time students are not enrolled in Mountain Heights as the school of record. In this case, Mountain Heights functions as a course provider ("USBE," n.d.). Therefore, the students with disabilities' school of record, typically their district brick-and-mortar school, holds the IEP and sets the appropriate accommodations and modifications as needed. The school of record also provides ancillary services such as guidance counseling, while the online course provider provides the accommodations as outlined in the IEP.

Teachers of special education work individually with the full-time students on their caseload, and they meet at least weekly to review overall progress. Students who qualify for special education services have access to an additional layer of assistance: a directed studies course taught by a certified special education teacher. Students are responsible for making appointments each week with their special education teacher to review progress made in each class and to fill out a self-advocacy checklist to indicate how well the student perceives they are advocating with each teacher. The directed studies course content consists of general study skill material which can be customized for each student depending on need.

Parents, teachers, administrators, guidance counselors, and the student all have a stake in the best educational interests of the student. An annual IEP meeting is scheduled throughout the year based partially on the annual IEP renewal due date and partially on the types of accommodations outlined in students' existing IEPs. Simply changing the setting from a brick-and-mortar school to an online school decreases the need for common brick-and-mortar accommodations, such as setting and time adjustments, including specialized seat placement at the front of the class, reduced distractions, and extended time per subject (Shaftel, Yang, Glasnapp, & Poggio, 2005, p. 358).

Parents, students, teachers, and administrators work together as the IEP team to determine the best plan for the student. This plan consists of accommodations (early access to content, extended time on tests, reduced workload) or modifications (leveled content, modified curriculum) as needed. The culture of the school includes a high expectation for student self-advocacy coupled with teacher support, and the team discusses transition planning for when the student graduates from high school and what their plans are as they enter adulthood, the workforce, and/or college.

At their first IEP meeting at the school, most parents typically request interventions and modifications for their child, because in previous settings many of these parents have had to insist on accommodations and anticipate having to do the same at this school. The great majority of parents typically leave content with the outcome of the IEP meeting because they feel supported, receive the requested accommodations, or they understand fully why they did not.

Our school has experienced significant growth in our student with disabilities population. The school opened in 2009 with 127 ninth grade students, five of whom were students served by special education services, for a total of 3.9% (Open High School of Utah, 2010). By late 2016 there were 81 students with disabilities out of 525 total students, which is 15.4% of all students ("UTREx," 2016). This is higher than the Utah state average for students with disabilities, which since 2009 when the school opened, has hovered between 11% and 13% ("National Center for Education Statistics," 2017).

Enrollment increases suggest that families whose children receive special education services are finding value in this particular online school, and the rate of growth warrants additional exploration into why parents and students are selecting this option. The following research questions guided the examination:

- What were the motives for and experiences of families of students with disabilities and their students on IEPs attending Mountain Heights Academy? In other words, why did they choose this school and what happened once they enrolled?
- Were their particular needs being met, and if so, how?

While enrollment trends for all students in online settings across the nation may be stabilizing, understanding why families of students with disabilities are selecting this particular online option could provide clarity about student experiences that are transferable to other online schools, that are also grappling with how to best serve their students with disabilities as evidenced by the student performance concerns outlined in current literature. Some aspects of what I discover in this study should be transferable to other online models and schools as well. In preparation for this study, I first surveyed the literature to understand the landscape of online education since 2000. I also reviewed the genesis of the current special education legal structure at the federal level and looked for further information on how the laws designed to protect students with disabilities are being implemented in online settings. I specifically reviewed literature that focused on online special education implementation and student outcomes and experiences. Then I sent surveys to all of the students on IEPs and their parents to determine the most common reasons for selecting this school. With these data, I then examined the lived experiences of 4 families with students with disabilities through in-depth semi-structured interviews.

CHAPTER 2

Literature Review

In order to understand how online education can meet the legal mandates for the education of students with disabilities, it is important to understand the legal infrastructure by which education law is governed and to grasp the process by which education services are delivered for students with disabilities.

In the United States, special education is governed primarily by federal laws, which include several landmark cases positioned to ensure equitable access to education for all students. Special education became a civil right for children with disabilities near the end of the 20th century when Congress enacted legislation known as the Education for All Handicapped Children Act on November 29, 1975. This legislation ensured that students with disabilities occupied a specified seat in secondary and post-secondary education in the United States and today is referred to as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA; 20 U.S.C. § 1400, 2004). In order to articulate the nuances of special education law, I will describe the most commonly referenced components of IDEIA in further detail below.

All public schools are required to provide a free appropriate public education, a standard commonly referred to as FAPE, to all of their students (20 U.S.C. § 1400, 2004). As such, public online schools are bound by the same laws and rules as their public brick-and-mortar district and charter school counterparts: to meet the needs of all students (Watson, Pape, Murin, Gemin, & Vashaw, 2014).

The local education agency (LEA), which can be any type of public school, has a responsibility to intervene in the general course of education to determine which strategies are or are not effective for students. This process is known as response to intervention (RTI). Common

interventions include, but are not limited to, additional instruction, scaffolded support, reduced workload, or extended time. Teachers implement the intervention then allow four to six weeks of observation and data collection in order to determine whether the student is appropriately responding to the intervention and whether it is having the desired effect on outcomes (20 U.S.C. § 1400, 2004).

The data gained through an RTI process is often used to assess a student's needs in the creation of an IEP. The IDEIA (2004) indicates that an IEP is:

> [A] statement of measurable annual goals, including academic and functional goals designed to meet the child's needs that result from the child's disability to enable the child to be involved in and make progress in the general education curriculum; and meet each of the child's other educational needs that result from the child's disabilities (Sections 300.320(a)(2)(i)(A) and (B)).

By law (20 U.S.C. § 1412), IEPs are constructed in a team setting in which an LEA representative annually convenes a meeting with the parent(s), student, administrator, general education teacher, and special education teacher to determine goals, accommodations, and modifications to curriculum and services in order to best meet student needs (2004). Federal statute outlined that student placement is determined based on a thorough review of cognitive test scores, responses to intervention, current classroom performance, input from teachers, parental feedback, and student voice (20 U.S.C. § 1400, 2004).

A key point of analysis in the IEP creation is student placement. LEAs are to place students with disabilities in the legally required (LRE), meaning they must be placed with their peers as much as is determined appropriate and only pulled out of the regular education setting for individual services as needed (20 U.S.C. § 1400). Keeping the student with their age-group

peers is a process known as *mainstreaming*, *integration*, or *inclusion*, while removing them from that setting can be referred to as a *pull-out program*.

Each of these special education legal attributes is important to understand in the traditional brick-and-mortar setting. Of equal importance is considering how these same concepts apply in a digital setting.

Within this section I will first review the methods by which I conducted the literature review by providing an overview of my inclusion criteria, search procedures and categorization strategies, and exclusion criteria and constraints. Then, I will review and synthesize the literature, organizing it into four thematic categories–the course content, the teacher, the learner, and the law–as I determine how each category interacts with students of disabilities in an online setting.

Literature Review Methodology

I reviewed more than 200 articles on online learning, special education, and educational technology. The majority of the articles mentioned students with disabilities or online learning as a minor component of the general topic of research, which either had little to do with special education or online learning combined. The key components of each category included the intersection of curriculum, teachers, students, and the law. Therefore, I sorted the articles into those categories for further refinement and review so I could compare them through the lens of similar themes.

Inclusion criteria. I reviewed research from 2000 to 2017 in order to identify the extent to which existing literature connected special education and online learning empirically in a K-12 education setting. Therefore, I established three main selection criteria: (a) the specific population receiving instruction; students with disabilities, (b) the mode of instruction; online

learning, and (c) the age group of those receiving the instruction; K-12 students, defined as students in kindergarten through 12th grades.

Search procedures and categorization strategies. Each of the three key terms above included multiple derivatives, such as *special needs students* for *students with disabilities, digital* or *cyber-learning* for *online learning*, and *primary and secondary students* for *K-12 students.* Therefore, the search procedures and strategies were refined to ensure inclusive results by searching for all potential combinations. The terms and synonyms are represented in Table 1.

Table 1

Search Terms and Synonyms

Population: Special Education	Mode: Online Learning	Age group: K-12 Students
Students with Disabilities	Virtual Learning/School(s)/ Schooling	K-12 students
Disabled Students	Digital Learning/School(s)/ Schooling	K-12 Education
Handicapped Students	Distance Learning	Junior High Students
Exceptional Students	E-Learning/E-School(s)/E-Schooling	High School Students
Special Needs Students	Cyber School(s)	Middle School Students
Students with Special Needs	Computer-Mediated Education/Instruction	Elementary School Students
Disadvantaged Students	Computer-Assisted Technologies	
At-Risk Students		

I searched a variety of databases–including EBSCO, ERIC, Google Scholar, and Academic Search Premier–using the terms and combinations of terms outlined in Table 1. In the

databases with advanced search capabilities, I investigated abstracts and titles along with reports from the United States Department of Education and the International Association for K-12 Blended and Online Learning (iNACOL) in order to determine how special education was being implemented and applied in online K-12 settings.

The final collection of my search for K-12 online special education in the United States and its derivatives, which included all three areas of interest, yielded 31 total items: including 19 journal articles, 9 reports, 2 books, and 1 conference proceeding.

Exclusion criteria and constraints. I excluded articles that focused solely on technology to be used by students with disabilities in an online K-12 setting because it did not meet the parameters of the research question, which focused on the student experience.

I confined my search to the United States because education law varies greatly from country to country, and while online education exists in other countries, online schools are significantly more prevalent in North America (Ferdig & Cavanaugh, 2010).

I chose to exclude literature from before 2000 due to the advances in online learning in the past 17 years. Additionally, the number of online schools in existence prior to 2000 was fairly sparse.

The Literature

K-12 online learning is a relatively young field of practice that is experiencing a rapid increase in the number of students participating in the online delivery of courses, particularly in secondary education, grades 7 through 12. As digital learning becomes more ubiquitous across the United States, serving the needs of those with disabilities online is an important topic of consideration. In 2008, the author of *Disrupting Class*, shared iNACOL ’s projection that by 2019, 50% of all 9-12 grade high school courses would be delivered online (Christensen, Horn,

& Johnson, 2008). Since that time, researchers at the Christensen Institute have released two updated reports modifying Christensen's claims. Several years later, Christensen, Horn, and Staker (2013) indicated that online learning, where the schooling takes place outside of a brick-and-mortar setting and the teacher is separated physically from the student, started plateauing at 10% of the K-12 population, giving rise to hybrid or blended options where learners had access to digital learning in a traditional setting. Most recently, they adjusted their prediction of courses being delivered online to include hybrid and blended learning taking place within a brick-and-mortar classroom setting and they suspected that models, such as Flex, Enriched Virtual, or A La Carte, would be the most sustainably disruptive (Christensen et al., 2013). Digital learning will play a key role in the future of education, whether it is in a uniquely online, blended, or a yet-to-be-discovered format.

The literature included institutional and educational data reports, practitioner and research reports, and some case studies. However, published research on special education in K-12 online learning was limited, based on the number of articles available, which created a critical gap in the literature due to the legal implications of inadequately implementing the appropriate responses to special education interventions in an online setting. I began by examining relevant literature that intersected online learning and K-12 special education.

Online learning, defined as an educational setting that offers secondary courses through digital means (Clark, 2001, p. 36), is an expanding area of mainstream education. Over the past decade, the number of students enrolled in at least one course in online education had grown from fewer than 8,000 students in 2004 (Barbour & Reeves, 2009) to over two million in 2012 (Watson, Murin, Vashaw, Gemin, & Rapp, 2012), which was roughly 5% of the entire kindergarten through 12th grade student population (Watson et al., 2012). Issues with data

disaggregation and student count logistics suggested the actual number of students enrolled in online schools may be difficult to identify (Miron, Gulosino, & Horvitz, 2014) and varied greatly by report (Cavanaugh, 2009). For example, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES), the number of enrollments in technology-based distance education district courses grew from 317,070 in 2002-2003 to 1,816,390 in 2009-2010, which were the most current data available ("Digest of Education Statistics," 2016). However, those numbers did not account for the number of students enrolled, just the number of enrollments in distance courses, the difference being that one student enrollment could equal multiple course enrollments depending on the number of online classes the student was taking. For example, one student could be taking seven courses, which could be counted as 14 semester enrollments, or even 28 quarter enrollments. The most recent Keeping Pace annual report provided enrollment numbers in state virtual schools that showed an increase from 720,815 semester course enrollments in 2012-2013 to 934,968 in 2015-2016 (Gemin & Pape, 2017, p. 18). However, only 24 states had state virtual schools, some states did not submit their data, and the report did not include enrollments in online charter schools or district online programs (Gemin & Pape, 2017). What we learned from these data sources, whether they were counting students or enrollments or full-time or part-time enrollment, was that the numbers had been increasing annually through 2016.

While online student enrollment appears to have increased steadily, it may have started to level off. Horn (2016) stated that while it may be unlikely for virtual schools to capture more than 5 to 10% of K-12 students in the United States, they do provide a needed service for those who did enroll, and we should work to better understand their value.

The majority of online schools in the United States are typically public charter schools or statewide online schools, both of which receive state and federal funding that requires them to

meet the educational needs of all student groups—including those with disabilities—in order to maintain successful and legally compliant online schools and programs (Carnahan & Fulton, 2013). The increase in students receiving educational services through an online format can be attributed to the variety of benefits offered to the students and parents and to the changing dynamics of modern educational offerings (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Cavanaugh, Gillan, Kromrey, Hess, & Blomeyer, 2004; Hassel, Terrell, & Public Impact, 2001). For example, when instructional content is housed online, the teacher's time can be leveraged more efficiently by tutoring small groups or individuals, leveraging Bloom's 2 sigma ideal (1984) of discovering group instructional methods that provided results as effective as that of one-on-one tutoring. These best practices are useful for all students generally but may be especially helpful specifically as interventions for students with disabilities.

Studies on how to meet the needs of lower performing students, including students with disabilities, have lagged to the point that researchers have issued a direct call to determine the quality of the learning experience for low-performing students in online-learning settings (Cavanaugh, Barbour, & Clark, 2009; Ferdig & Kennedy, 2018; Vasquez & Serianni, 2012).

In this literature review, I attempt to address this gap in understanding the quality of online learning for low-performing students by exploring what was known about how online education was meeting the needs of students with disabilities and how the benefits of online education could impact them. First, I provide an overview of special education in the United States as historical context. Second, I review the literature on K-12 special education in online learning from 2000-2017. Third, I explore the implications of the emergent themes and how they applied to students with disabilities. Fourth, I offer recommendations for future research, and finally, I draw conclusions based on the information presented.

I included a review and synthesis of the existing literature, organized in terms of four emergent themes: (a) the content, (b) the teacher, (c) the learner, and (d) the law. Each theme is divided into sub-themes indicating how they relate to K-12 online special education, in an attempt to present them in a meaningful, constructive way, as articulated in Table 2. Many articles reviewed multiple categories outlined below; therefore, they are included in the total for each sub-theme they represent. For example, one article may have discussed student outcomes in terms of teacher professional development and preparation, along with access to modify the content via appropriate instructional design methods. Thus, the article would be counted in sub-themes for content: instructional design, teacher: professional development, and student: learner outcomes. I discuss the literature through the lens of each theme and its sub-themes.

Table 2

K-12 Online Special Education Emergent Literature Review Themes and Number of Articles

Main theme	Sub-theme 1	Sub-theme 2
Content (18 articles)	Instructional Design: The design process of building content or learning environments (13 articles)	Equitable Access: Ensuring that third party access to the content is equitable (5 articles)
Teacher (17 articles)	Educational Practice/Pedagogy: What the teacher does in terms of his/her own practice (15 articles)	Professional Development: Learning that is provided for the teacher to refine or develop his/her practice (2 articles)
Learner (19 articles)	Well-being, Satisfaction: How the learner feels or perceives his/her educational experience (6 articles)	Learner Outcomes—Student Performance, Assessment: The outcomes the learner produces or achieves (13 articles)
Law (11 articles)	Implementation of Statutes: How statutes and policies that govern special education are implemented in an online setting (8 articles)	Federal and State Statutes: The existence of statutes and policies that govern special education in general (3 articles)
Total: 65 articles	42 articles	23 articles

The content. Eighteen articles focused on course content. In the earliest studies, the focus revolved around content, both design and access. Initially, the studies positioned content in terms of its component pieces and the internal process of instructional design or the inherent design of the learning environment itself (Brown, Standen, Proctor, & Sterland, 2001; Keeler & Horney, 2007; Kinash, Crichton, & Kim-Rupnow, 2004; Smith & Meyen, 2003), while those a few years later examined the curriculum in terms of the external process of equitable access to the content, in other words, how learners interacted with the content (Rose & Blomeyer, 2007; Vasquez & Straub, 2012).

Instructional design. Thirteen of the articles, ranging from 2001 to 2013, referred to some aspect of content or instructional design. One significant contribution consisted of a set of design guidelines built specifically for learners with disabilities to use in virtual-learning environments (Brown et al., 2001), while several articles extolled the virtues of the universal design method as a way to meet the needs of learners with disabilities (Axelson, 2005; Keeler & Horney, 2007; Smith & Meyen, 2003). More recently, iNACOL issued a brief that included self-reported survey results determining the number of at-risk students being served (Archambault et al., 2010). Additionally, there were several vignettes of successful strategies that fit within the content-instructional design theme, all of which were distilled philosophically into the customization or modification of the content to meet the needs of students with disabilities (Archambault et al., 2010). Although the vignettes provided useful information and practical advice, it would be difficult to generalize the results because they were anecdotal.

However, one rare longitudinal study provided interesting empirical results that appeared to be generalizable. Students in a specific setting were allowed to choose a particular content design—traditional, extended, or accelerated—meaning they had the ability to select the pace at

which they moved through the course (Allday & Allday, 2011). The results showed that the students who selected the extended time generally performed the worst, while those who chose the traditional or accelerated tracks fared better (Allday & Allday, 2011).

A year later, Vasquez and Serianni (2012) issued a call for more research when they presupposed an end to the debate over whether technology influences learning (Clark, 1994; Kozma, 1994) with their assertion that technology was an integral part of the content and not an augmentation. They also examined a critical point of debate regarding the internal construction of the content: instructional design theme, when they questioned whether methods designed for face-to-face settings transferred well into online settings, especially for students with disabilities (Vasquez & Serianni, 2012).

While one of the studies included in the instructional design category provided empirical, generalizable data, the majority did not. However, there was critical contextual information that was gleaned from each article that may be helpful to practitioners and researchers alike.

Equitable access. Part of the allure of online learning in general, and one of its greatest affordances, can be captured in two words: equitable access (Hassel et al., 2001). This is further evidenced by studies spanning the last decade at the intersection of online learning and students with disabilities, which investigated and called for equitable access (Kinash et al., 2004; Muller, 2010; Rose & Blomeyer, 2007; Smith & Meyen, 2003; Vasquez & Straub, 2012).

In 2007, researchers asserted that online learning held the key to providing equitable access to a high-quality education to a variety of students, including low-achieving students, and students with disabilities (Rose & Blomeyer, 2007). They observed that the literature contained quantitative and qualitative studies pointing to online learning as a potential solution to providing

the same level of access that general education students enjoy to students with disabilities (Rose & Blomeyer, 2007).

One report situated the issue of equitable access squarely in terms of the legal policies and regulations that govern special education, and the researchers were sensitive in describing each school's responsibility in providing unfettered access to the content through technology-mediated devices, modifications, and accommodations, regardless of ability or disability (Rose & Blomeyer, 2007). Providing for student needs as a matter of pedagogy was the first order of research, and the second was a matter of law:

> Having the ability to modify curriculum and make special adaptations for these learners is just a component that needs to be considered as a best practice, but has potential legal ramifications if schools fail to meet the needs of these learners (Carnahan & Fulton, 2013, p. 52).

In one particularly broad study, the goal was to add to existing research conducted to understand how online learning impacts students with disabilities in K-12 education in the United States (Burdette, Greer, & Woods, 2012). The researchers sent surveys to 61 state and territory directors of special education and received responses to 46 for a 75% response rate to "investigate (a) the influences driving online learning in their jurisdictions, (b) the participation of students with disabilities in online learning, and (c) the issues concerning the provision of a free and appropriate public education in an online learning environment" (Burdette et al., 2012, p. 71).

Two key gaps stood out, which are also emergent themes in this literature review: (a) meeting accessibility requirements by increased access to curriculum, and (b) having enough support staff to serve the needs of all at-risk students (Burdette et al., 2012). The conclusions of

this study support the incremental adaptation of special education policies in the online setting. Policies fall short, however, in completely providing FAPE in the least restrictive environment online due to the increase of students with different disability types entering the world of online education, meaning the ability to differentiate individually becomes more difficult (Burdette et al., 2012, p. 70).

The teacher. Eleven researchers mentioned the theme of pedagogy or the educational practice of the teacher at least peripherally in their articles (Archambault et al., 2010; Brown et al., 2001; Carnahan & Fulton, 2013; Fitzgerald, Miller, Higgins, Pierce, & Tandy, 2012; Keeler & Horney, 2007; Muller & National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2009; Muller, 2010; Repetto, Cavanaugh, Wayer, & Liu, 2010; Smith & Meyen, 2003; Spitler, Repetto, & Cavanaugh, 2013; Vasquez & Serianni, 2012), while only two focused on the professional development of the teacher (Muller, 2010; Smith & Meyen, 2003).

Educational practice. The educational practice theme emerged in a balanced manner, woven throughout the decade and a half of the literature review. The initial research examined tutoring strategies as a methodology developed specifically for use with at-risk and students with disabilities (Brown et al., 2001). The focus of the research on educational practice pivoted back and forth between content (Keeler & Horney, 2007) and student outcomes (Carnahan & Fulton, 2013). Keeler and Horney (2007) explored how deliberate instructional design can augment the learning experience of students with disabilities in an online setting by focusing on principles of universal design. Rice and Carter (2015) also peripherally mentioned instructional design as a frustration for certain online educators of students with disabilities because the teachers don't have access to the proprietary content to be able to make the necessary accommodations and modifications required by statute. One of the most comprehensive studies reviewed how online

learning provided a potential solution for at-risk learners, including those with disabilities, to stay in school, recover credits, and not drop out (Repetto et al., 2010). Their strategies for student retention centered around educational practices designed to connect with and care about the learner, as per the 5 Cs framework, which includes (a) connect, (b) care, (c) climate, (d) curriculum, and (e) control (Repetto et al., 2010).

Professional development. The theme of teacher: professional development in working with students with disabilities in an online setting was only reviewed specifically in two articles (Muller, 2010; Smith & Meyen, 2003). However, professional development was offered as a potential area for further research in several articles. Rice and Dawley (2009) called for more teacher professional development for online teachers in general and mentioned additional training for working with students with disabilities through university training programs. There was also interest in professional development for support staff such as guidance counselors and tutors who work peripherally with students with disabilities (Repetto et al., 2010). This idea was echoed by Rice and Carter who identified additional training for online administrators and educators as an area of need in serving student with disabilities, specifically the evolution of professional development, the types of professional development practices and models, and professional development needs in global and situational contexts (2015).

The learner. Research about learners in K-12 online special education mainly centered around external characteristics, such as student outcomes, performance, and assessment (Allday & Allday, 2011; Archambault et al., 2010; Burdette et al., 2012; Cavanaugh, 2009; Repetto et al., 2010; Smith & Meyen, 2003; Spitler et al., 2013). Only two studies addressed learner well-being and satisfaction, and one review referenced one of the previous studies (Beck, Maranto, & Lo, 2014; Beck, Egalite, & Maranto, 2014; Harvey, Greer, Basham, & Hu, 2014).

Well-being and satisfaction. In a survey of education stakeholders, parents of students with disabilities found the idea of online learning very appealing, while others, such as educators, administrators, and policymakers, were less enthusiastic that online special education services could be provided to students effectively (Rhim, Kowal, & National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2008). More recently, and despite mixed effectiveness results, students with disabilities (and their parents) were somewhat more satisfied in their online schools than they were in their previous traditional schools than were their mainstream peers (Beck, Egalite, et al., 2014, Rhim et al., 2008).

Secondary-school students who were surveyed about why they chose to attend an online school responded that they craved more autonomy, enjoyed better health by not having to be at school so early, and felt safer and less judged; in short, they had a greater sense of well-being (Beck, Maranto, et al., 2014). They also seemed generally more pleased with their online learning experiences than the professional education stakeholders who raised concerns (Beck, Egalite, et al., 2014; Rhim et al., 2008; Rose & Blomeyer, 2007). While this student survey focused on why they chose to attend an online school, it did not address the reasons why they left their previous setting, nor did it include parent perspectives.

Personalized learning environments that remove the constraints of time, while potentially beneficial for all students, create the ability to provide a needed accommodation for students with disabilities. In a survey of state directors of special education, respondents from 18 states indicated that flexibility, described in terms of the ability to customize and individualize, was a primary reason that students in their states explored online education as an option (Burdette et al., 2012).

As of 2014 there was a marked increase in the amount of research that focused on learner well-being as opposed to learner outcomes. In other words, researchers began focusing more on the overall student experience rather than only looking at grades and test scores (Beck, Maranto, et al., 2014; Beck, Egalite, et al., 2014; Fernandez, Ferdig, Thompson, Schottke, & Black, 2016; Harvey et al., 2014; Johnston, Greer, & Smith, 2014; Rice & Carter, 2015). This is especially germane for students with disabilities who may improve by smaller increments in lower quartiles because the data may not show the whole picture. For example, if a 10th grade student improves from a 35% to a 50% on a standardized test, their overall score would not necessarily increase, but looking at the difference between starting and end points shows marked improvement and good trajectory. A student may very well be happy in their setting and be making progress that evades quantitative data.

Outcomes. Research indicating potential effectiveness included a study showing the potential of online learning as a viable vehicle to address the needs of at-risk learners (Rose & Blomeyer, 2007). However, other studies revealed significant gaps to be reviewed in online special education, particularly in the areas of accountability and assessments (Rhim et al., 2008).

The research was mixed on student outcomes and skills in online education, although course and instructor quality were more significant indicators of success than the location of the student while taking the course (Cavanaugh, 2009). Assessment and student performance themes emerged concurrently with universal design as entrepreneurs sought to create assessment tools based on principles of universal design. The purpose was to enhance the ability to collect data from all students but to specifically pinpoint deficiencies in students with disabilities (Axelson, 2005). In Pennsylvania, researchers studied K-12 online special education by disability type and found that although student performance on standardized tests was not stellar, there was gradual

growth (Carnahan & Fulton, 2013). Reading was a particular area of concern because of the text-heavy nature of most online-learning settings. If students with disabilities struggled with reading in general and relied on reading skills for the majority of their content intake, there could be serious negative implications where students are double penalized for struggling with reading skills (Carnahan & Fulton, 2013).

The law. The advent of online learning and the nexus of legal statutes surrounding students with disabilities puts a fine point on Negroponte's (1995) statement: "Most laws were conceived in and for a world of atoms, not bits" (p. 236). The majority of existing statutes for students with disabilities was designed to govern traditional educational settings, not digital learning, therefore additional interpretation is warranted and needed.

Implementation of statute. Eight articles reviewed existing federal laws and how to implement the existing statute in online settings (Burdette et al., 2012; Muller & National Association of State Directors of Special Education, 2009; Muller, 2010; Rhim et al., 2008; Rice & Carter, 2015; Rose & Blomeyer, 2007; Thompson, Ferdig, & Black, 2012; Vasquez & Straub, 2012).

Rhim et al. (2008) created a primer on special education policies specifically for online charter leaders as a reference. They found that while charter schools are local education agencies (LEAs) they are not bound by the same stringent requirements as district schools, such as not requiring the use of certified educators. This discrepancy created gaps in areas of knowledge, most notably special education law (Rhim et al., 2008). Several also raised concerns about school leadership not appropriately identifying students with disabilities and not providing the required related services (Muller, 2010; Rhim et al., 2008). Rice and Carter (2015) discovered that educators in general educators such as administrators, counselors, and teachers, were

concerned about how best to implement brick-and-mortar policies, rules, and statutes, such as students being provided a specific number of minutes for services, in an online setting. The conclusion was that more training was needed on how special education laws that were crafted specifically for brick-and-mortar settings would apply online and that policies could benefit from additional clarification for implementation in online schools.

Federal and state statute. Three articles identified and addressed federal statutes and how they applied to students with disabilities in online learning (Burdette et al., 2012; Rhim et al., 2008; Rose & Blomeyer, 2007).

Researchers found that 75% of the state education authority special education directors indicated on a survey that policies needed to be clarified in order to appropriately provide for FAPE in the online LRE (Burdette et al., 2012). The percentage of respondents represented a broad sampling from those most directly involved in serving the needs of students with disabilities.

Rhim et al. (2008) acknowledged the dilemma faced by many online schools which are bound by statute to implement IDEIA with complete fidelity but who may be ill-equipped to do so for a variety of reasons which include lack of training, laws that are ambiguous and ill-fitted for the online setting, and large geographical areas that make face-to-face related services such as occupational therapy or speech language therapy, difficult to identify, track, and provide.

Another study supported robust enrollment data collection for online courses in order to ensure that equitable access to online courses was the same as the access for face-to-face courses (Rose & Blomeyer, 2007). The researchers acknowledged the complicated nuance between equitable and equal.

> If a school doesn't provide computer or internet access to any students in their online program, that treatment is considered equal. However, when only those students with personal computers and internet access at home are able to take advantage of the benefits and opportunities of the online program, the program is not considered equitable. (Rose & Blomeyer, 2007, pp. 7-8)

The majority of the research acknowledged that statutes were created prior to online schools becoming ubiquitous and needed to be reviewed for practical application in the current educational climate.

Implications and Future Research

It became clear after after synthesizing the literature and reviewing the emergent themes, which areas at the intersection of K-12 online learning and students with disabilities are well-researched and where the largest gaps exist. I will discuss the potential implications for future research in the four areas with the most noticeable gaps: (a) equitable access to content, (b) professional development for teachers, (c) well-being and satisfaction of learners, and (d) federal and state statutes. While this is not an exhaustive list, it is a starting point meant to provide focus and to add to the body of work already in existence.

Equitable access to content. Cavanaugh et al. (2004) indicated that the key benefits of online learning included three fundamental elements, one of them being "increased access to resources" (p. 2). Five years later, Barbour and Reeves (2009) reviewed the literature and increased the benefits of online learning to five, including "expanding educational access" (p. 4) One of the advantages of online learning is clear access for all populations; however, it seems to have particular advantage for those with disabilities (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Cavanaugh et al., 2004).

According to best practices outlined in special education law, general education curriculum access should be provided for students with disabilities, according to the needs stated in the IEP (20 U.S.C. § 1400, 2004). The Department of Education has observed that one of the primary outcomes of the IEP meeting for students with disabilities is that they must have access to and make progress within the general curriculum (20 U.S.C. § 1400, 2004). Ensuring that children with disabilities have access to the general curriculum is a major focus of the requirements for developing a child's IEP. In both a traditional and online educational setting, a common modification is the implementation of a tiered curriculum specific to the student's needs, which commonly consist of similar content at a reduced level for Tier 2 and a more basic level of content for tier 3. Each course should theoretically be presented in three tiers, with a variety of interventions and scaffolded support for struggling learners. General education teachers may make the modifications; however, special education teachers should have access to the curriculum in order to make adjustments per the IEP accommodations listed, depending on the level of customization needed. Additional research on professional development for general education teachers to collaborate with special education teachers to implement digital resources is needed.

Open educational resources. Students and teachers can have increased access to resources in online learning. Gaps in student understanding can quickly be targeted and filled in this customized setting. The digital nature of the content theoretically makes the modification and delivery of tiered special education curriculum simpler to accomplish than in a brick-and-mortar setting. Because of the adaptation necessary to provide special needs instruction to students, many schools and providers rely on proprietary digital content, then supplement with additional online material or adjust the workload by reducing the amount to be done. In

proprietary settings, students with disabilities have access to content from a variety of grade levels, and content can be adjusted by having students do odd or even numbered questions, similar to the same modification in a brick-and-mortar setting.

Some teachers, schools, and districts provide access to customizable, editable, non-proprietary content that can be shared within the educational community (Velasquez, Graham, & West, 2013). This adaptable content allows teachers to work collaboratively to customize and revise the curriculum for various groups of students (Velasquez et al., 2013). These items are generally categorized as open educational resources (OER), defined as "teaching, learning, and research resources that reside in the public domain or have been released under an intellectual property license that permits their free use or re-purposing by others" (Atkins, Brown, & Hammond, 2007, p. 14).

Using OER can provide a potential real-time solution to general education teachers as an intervention for student with disabilities. The customization of OER content allows instructional designers and teachers to appropriately tier special education curriculum to meet the needs of students with disabilities, while providing for LRE provisions and meeting legal requirements to make modifications.

In an open educational resource setting, the actual content can be altered and presented to the student in the appropriately tiered format (Velasquez et al., 2013). In both settings the content is much more readily adjustable than a traditional textbook.

Coupled with a data-driven, developmental evaluation model (Patton, 2010), using OER has the potential to create an innovative, fast-paced, continuous curriculum improvement process that can yield high-quality content and higher-performing students (Tonks, Weston, Wiley, & Barbour, 2013). A potential drawback is the need to customize content for an overwhelming

number of needs that are distinct to students in a special education setting. However, OER can provide a potential answer for creating tiers in the general education curriculum to better meet the needs of students with disabilities. A gap exists in the literature about the efficacy of OER used in digital settings to benefit students with disabilities.

Physical access. Students with disabilities need to physically access their education in ways that may not seem obvious at first. Many students with disabilities have physical, behavioral, or locational limitations to their educational access. One advantage to online schools and programs is the ability to remove these limiting factors for students with disabilities' access to education. If successfully implemented, the virtual nature of these programs can position students with physical limitations to obtain an equally comparable learning experience as their mainstream peers, which is an area for further study.

Closed captioning. Many online courses include videos in some form or another. Care should be taken to include closed captioning so the level of access is the same for all students with disabilities. For instructional designers, closed captioning could become an integral part of the workflow when designing videos in order to increase access to all populations. Additional research into access could include a review of media to ensure equitable access.

Teacher professional development. The evolution of online learning includes a separation phase of sorts from the pedagogical constraints of a brick-and-mortar setting. The typical setting, schedule, and tools teachers use in a brick-and-mortar school may not translate well into the digital arena. For example, rather than implementing the same teaching techniques in a different venue—such as synchronous subject instruction five days a week at 9:00 am in a virtual chat room—online learning requires different tools and different pedagogy. Teachers

need to be trained on how to translate effective brick-and-mortar best practices into effective online teaching best practices.

Online teacher certification. Similarly, practitioners are recognizing the need for online teacher certification programs because the strategies that an excellent brick-and-mortar teacher applies in that setting may not transfer as well to an online setting, because online teaching requires a different skill set. iNACOL has developed National Standards for Quality Online Teaching that provide a useful roadmap for guidance. The organization also hosts monthly webinars and an annual conference. To date, there have been several K-12 online special education-specific webinars and workshops, so perhaps an online special education endorsement from iNACOL is a potential solution. Georgia Virtual and several other schools have site-based certifications and endorsement programs. It is critical to view these endorsements as an addition to an existing teacher certification, not as a substitution for it.

Online special education consortium. One of the most practical and easy-to-implement solutions would be an online special education consortium where practitioners could share best practices. There are organic education chats on Twitter for various groups of professionals, including special educators, under the hashtag #SpED. These communities of practice provide a legitimate, overt way for newcomers and veterans alike to connect and share best practices (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

Training for general education teachers on curriculum modification. General education teachers are the stewards of the first two tiers of modifications. They could benefit from some professional development to become more engaged instructional designers to ensure the standards and goals are being met. Caring for our vulnerable students is the responsibility of the entire education team and not solely the licensed special education experts.

Therefore, teacher certification programs in universities could place more emphasis on the different types of education available post-graduation and provide additional exposure to online learning as a legitimate means of learning during the practicum phase. Existing online institutions can and do develop their own professional development programs and trainings for their general education teachers. Perhaps those could be more widely shared in a consortium model with emphasis placed on what online education looks like for students with disabilities, the role of the general education teacher in facilitating the first two tiers of curriculum, and how OER can be used as an intervention.

Learner well-being and satisfaction. One potential benefit of online interaction in a peer setting may be the ability of technology to provide equity to students with disabilities. In an online setting the general education population may not be immediately aware of a student's disability, especially if the physical manifestation is limited, thereby reducing potential for stigmatization. Students with disabilities have the opportunity to be treated like every other student and to be judged on the ideas they submit to the group discussion rather than by external factors (Beck, Maranto, et al., 2014). The online setting may give students with disabilities the ability to blend in and gain confidence.

Student time looks different, especially in asynchronous online settings. In terms of self-determination, students can manage their own time and schedule, deadlines, and school start and end times each day, which may increase the students with disabilities' chances for success in a different manner (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

In a more flexible environment, students have the ability to work on their own schedule and at their own pace, especially in asynchronous online settings (Cavanaugh, 2009). Students are not bound by time or location because they are able to participate in their educational

experiences from anywhere, provided they have internet access. Rather than students each receiving the traditional 50 minutes per subject whether they needed 25 or 75 minutes, students are now able to spend as much or as little time necessary to complete their coursework online.

Health considerations, such as not having to get up early every morning for students with migraines, sleep disorders, or other health issues, create a greater sense of well-being as students can take more control over their education (Beck, Egalite, et al., 2014).

Qualitative research of representative samples of students, parents, and teachers would provide deeper context to the state of special education services in secondary online education. One study outlined the concerns with student performance for students with disabilities in the online setting, especially in the areas of accountability and assessment (Rose & Blomeyer, 2007). Multiple researchers have called for qualitative research in special education in order to drive policy and practice because the individual and collective narratives have the ability to complement the readily available quantitative data and reach policymakers on an emotional level (Brantlinger, Jimenez, Klingner, Pugach, & Richardson, 2005; Pugach, Mukhopadhyay, & Gomez-Najarro, 2014). The authors argue that solid empirical qualitative research is possible, and they provide an overview of how to accomplish that through case studies and action research (Brantlinger et al., 2005; Pugach et al., 2014). Longitudinal research that follows decent-sized student cohorts would be very valuable, as would surveys and case studies. The most glaring gaps in the research consist of small sample sizes and non-generalizable studies that were conducted at one school or in one state.

Federal and state legal statutes. Negroponte (1995) astutely observed that our legal system is composed of laws that address atoms, not bits. While there is not much that educators

can do to update federal statute other than lobby persuasively for interpretations that include online resources and settings, there is plenty of work that can be done at the state and local level.

Online school administrators can invite legislators to meet with them and with key student ambassadors so the policymakers develop a sound understanding of what online learning actually looks like. By keeping legislators and policymakers on email lists for media updates so they are aware of awards, media clips, and positive contributions, online schools are making, school leaders can foster relationships with those who drive policy and be in a position to influence it as needed.

Deliberate research is needed on how to craft policy and legislation going forward, taking special care to include all stakeholders in the process. Parents, educators, and students each need a voice.

Implications for Current Study

Nationally, students with disabilities comprise 11-13% of the population, and a similar percentage of students with disabilities are choosing online learning as their educational option (Carnahan & Fulton, 2013). Most of the institutions delivering online learning are public charter or statewide schools bound by the same state and federal statutes as their public district counterparts, part of which is to provide FAPE (Rhim et al., 2008). As a result of the fast pace of the trajectory and growth in online learning in the United States, the practice has outpaced the research (Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Ferdig & Kennedy, 2018; Vasquez & Serianni, 2012).

The literature clearly highlights four areas where scholars could focus their research: (a) equitable access to content, (b) professional development for teachers, (c) student well-being and satisfaction, and (d) law and policy updates. Deliberate attention needs to be paid to research in special education and online learning settings in order ensure that students are appropriately

supported as the percentage of students with disabilities increases in virtual schools (Scherer, 2006; Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Burdette et al., 2012). Researchers and educators not only have the opportunity but also have the responsibility to leverage scholarship to identify gaps in the collective knowledge base to serve the needs of our most vulnerable students.

I presume that the following three areas of potential research intersect with and support my primary area of interest in student well-being and satisfaction: (a) equitable access to content, meaning that student needs are being met by the teacher's ability to appropriately adapt course content, (b) professional development for teachers in the area of online education for students with disabilities, and (c) law and policy updates for special education in an online setting, will intersect with and support my primary area interest of student well-being and satisfaction. Student well-being and satisfaction may be enhanced by well-trained teachers who are knowledgeable about law and policy updates and who have adequate access to professional development on how to work with students with disabilities online. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, I focus on students with disabilities and their well-being and satisfaction in an online setting.

Due to the rate of growth of the students with disabilities population at Mountain Heights, research is needed to determine why parents of students with disabilities are enrolling their students, and how both parents and students view their experiences.

CHAPTER 3

Methods

In this section, I describe the methods I used to conduct this study, which consisted of an explanatory mixed-methods design that incorporated survey and interview data (Creswell, 2008). First, I provide an in-depth description of the target population to provide context. Then, I describe the specific participants of the study. Next, I provide an overview of the data collection procedures that were used. Then, I describe the survey and interview methods. Lastly, I include information about positionality and bias, rigor, and limitations and delimitations.

Research Design and Instrumentation

This was a mixed-methods study focusing on why families of students with disabilities chose online learning at this particular school and how their needs were met once they enrolled. I synthesized qualitative and quantitative data collected from an online parent survey, an online student survey, and qualitative parent and student interview data, which are needed in order to design a quality mixed-methods research study (Creswell, 2008).

In an explanatory mixed-methods design (Creswell, 2008) quantitative data precede the qualitative data. I began with quantitative survey data to determine parent and student attitudes and practices related to the school to better understand why families chose to enroll. I designed the quantitative portion of the survey using a 4-point Likert scale in order to clearly define the participant's degree of agreement between *strongly agree, agree, disagree*, and *strongly disagree.*

Section 1 of the survey included one short-answer question designed to capture the main reason parents and students chose to attend the school: "What is the main reason you decided to have your student attend the school?"

Section 2 was comprised of seven Likert-scale questions coupled with a short answer response if the parent or student strongly agreed or agreed to determine the degree of agreement with various reasons the general parent and student populations chose to enroll in the school based on prior school survey information (Swinton, 2017). Additionally, for each Likert-scale question, I gathered responses about parents' and students' current experiences at the school to help determine if and how their needs were being met after enrollment.

The statements included the following:

- I chose to enroll my student in this school because of the flexible schedule.
- I chose to enroll my student in this school because it is online.
- I chose to enroll my student in this school because the teachers are available to help him or her.
- I chose to enroll my student in this school because of the class lessons. (What is taught in the classes).
- I chose to enroll my student in this school because my student wanted to come here.
- I chose to enroll my student because our previous school was not a good fit.
- I chose to enroll my student because they got a laptop to use.

In order to encourage the parents and students to answer the questions in Section 2 as accurately as possible, I requested that they think back to how they felt when they were looking at different schools and to answer the questions based on those feelings at the time. The participants were also asked to be specific and to provide as much detail as possible.

Section 3 included demographic and background information. Questions included gender, race, ethnicity, grade level of student when the student started at the school, and which of the four quarters the student began attending the school.

I validated the instrument to ensure that it captured the information I needed it to capture. The instrument creation process included think alouds, a pilot, and colleague feedback in order to determine that the conclusions were valid (Przeworski & Salomon, 1988).

Leveraging the expertise of a variety of online special education teachers, general education teachers, and administrators, I conducted two "think aloud" cognitive interviews in August 2017 after constructing the initial survey. The process consisted of displaying a copy of the instrument and exploring each question to determine if the way it was presented captured the intent of the researcher and provided answers to the research questions. If there were concerns, questions were clarified by rewording, removing, and/or replacing as needed.

The survey was then piloted to a group of Mountain Heights Academy students on a 504 plan and their parents in October of 2017. The survey pilot group provided invaluable feedback that was relevant to the final iteration of the survey the following spring.

In terms of instrument reliability, Cronbach's alpha measures internal consistency or "how closely related a set of items are as a group" ("What does Cronbach's," n.d., para. 1). When considering measures of reliability, a coefficient of .70 or above is considered "acceptable" in most social science research situations (2006). The results of the Cronbach's alpha measurement for the parent survey is .70, and for the student survey it is .71, which indicates that the survey was a reasonably reliable instrument.

The parent cover letter, implied consent form, and the complete list of survey questions for parents are provided in Appendices A, B, and C. The student cover letter, parental permission

form, child assent, youth assent, and the list of survey questions for students are provided in Appendices D, E, F, G, and H. The surveys and all of the information in the appendices were reviewed by the Brigham Young University Independent Review Board for approval to conduct research with human subjects and approval was granted in February 2018.

Once I analyzed the quantitative data from the survey questions and thematically coded the open-ended survey questions, those themes informed the types of semi-structured interview questions I posed. The interview questions were reviewed by two independent third parties with experience as administrators and education consultants for a variety of charter schools in Utah. After providing parents with a cover letter (Appendix I), I reviewed adult consent procedures to be a research subject (Appendix J) and reviewed the semi-structured interview questions (Appendix K). For the students, I ensured that I had the student cover letter, appropriate parental permission form for minors, and the youth assent form in Appendices L, M, and N, prior to asking the interview questions in Appendix O. I then individually interviewed five students with disabilities and the parent most involved in the IEP process in order to clarify the survey data. The students and parents were selected based on purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) from their depth of knowledge of and experiences with the emergent thematic results of the short-answer section of the survey. Thus, though I proposed some initial examples of semi-structured guiding questions, I expected these questions to evolve and respond to the themes and results of the survey. When quantitative and qualitative data collection methods are integrated in this way, they can provide not only breadth but also depth to create “a powerful mix” (Miles & Huberman, 1994, p. 42). This integrated two-phase research design provided quantitative data regarding the school’s special education population and allowed me the ability to clarify and refine results using qualitative data as a follow up (Creswell, 2008).

Validity

In order to create a valid survey and interview questions, I implemented multiple processes, checks, and balances. I spent ample time between April of 2017 and January 2019 to ensure that pilots, member-checks, colleague reviews, and feedback were included in the process. I began interacting with human subjects in February 2018 once I received IRB approval. "Validity is not a commodity that can be purchased with techniques" (Lynch, Brinberg, & McGrath, 1986, p. 13). Rather, it requires diligence and attention to detail in addition to investment and involvement.

The length of time involved in the design and construction of the instrument and the interview questions lent legitimacy and strengthened the process of designing the survey. Intensive, long-term involvement, or the longer you are involved with your research, the better (Maxwell, 2013). I began this project in April of 2017 and concluded in January of 2019. The length of time I invested in this research allowed me to improve the survey and interview questions along with the research methods and implementation processes from the time of its inception to its distribution by creating opportunities to pilot, to do in-depth research, and to invite others to review and fine-tune the themes.

Additionally, the iterative process of the instrument and interview designs provided for adjustments to be made that strengthened the validity. Initially, I researched survey design using books specific to instrument creation. Next, I created a rough draft of the survey and requested input from colleagues and peers, which included multiple graduate students, education specialists, and colleagues. I conducted a think aloud with special education colleagues, reviewed every item, and discussed the rationale for it based on the purpose of the survey. I reviewed the feedback and adjusted accordingly. Then I conducted a second think aloud with the

same colleagues to ensure responder validation of their provided feedback. Once satisfied with the instrument after doing research and doing think alouds with experts, I distributed a pilot survey to a group of people with experience in the same areas as the intended audience. This group included students on 504s who attended the same online school and their parents. Once the transcriptions had been coded and analyzed thematically, I conducted respondent validation, also known as member checks (Maxwell, 2013), with each group to assure that I represented their perceptions accurately. I also reviewed the instrument multiple times with my BYU professors to ensure that the design met the research requirements. Lastly, I collected information from a diverse range of families with children served on IEPs who had been enrolled in the school for one to five years. I compared their perceptions to strengthen the validity through triangulation.

I followed a similar process during the design of the semi-structured interview questions. Once the questions were approved, I solicited input from colleagues, made adjustments, piloted, and finalized. I relied upon multiple common qualitative methods to ensure trustworthiness, including the following: triangulation; member checks; survey and interview question piloting with parents and students at the same school who were served by 504 plans; and third-party expert feedback.

According to Creswell (2008), the rationale for employing a mixed-methods research design provides the researcher with the opportunity to implement quantitative and qualitative data in the study. Using both types of data allowed for both a general overview of how families of students with disabilities and their children responded to their experiences at the school and provided a specific look at the experiences of several families who participated in the academic experience of the student.

There are specific types of mixed-methods designs that lend themselves well to the combination of a quantitative survey and phenomenological follow-up through a qualitative interview. In this explanatory mixed-methods research design, the quantitative survey gathered common information from a larger segment of the target population and the majority of the qualitative data occurred next in the research sequence during the interview phase.

While Creswell (2008) provided an overall framework of an explanatory mixed-methods research design, the specifics for which quantitative and qualitative methods to use were not included. Therefore, in the data collection section below, I provided additional justification and clarification for specific survey and interview methods that I employed.

Context

I will now explain the context for the study. Context is important in general in mixed-methods research, but it is critical to understand the context of this particular school in order to fully appreciate the research questions and outcomes. I provided a broad overview and historical context of Mountain Heights Academy complete with demographic information and any considerations of note that impacted the context of the study.

When the school first opened in 2009, the school enrolled 127 ninth graders, and employed seven faculty and staff. Of the enrolled students, five were identified as students with disabilities, which represented 3.9% of the total school population.

In 2010, the school added tenth graders for a total student population of 227, nine of whom were students with disabilities, composing 3.96% of the total student body. In 2011, the legislature approved the implementation of the Statewide Online Education Program. This legislation allowed part-time students attending their district schools to take up to two credits online per year from various providers (State of Utah, 2011). This bill made it possible for the

school to educate students on a part-time basis by enrolling them in up to four classes online while remaining enrolled in the rest of their courses at their brick-and-mortar school of record ("USBE," n.d.).

The school served 328 ninth through 12th grade students in 2011-2012 (Mountain Heights Academy, 2012). Because of high demand, the school added 11th grade as scheduled and 12th grade a year ahead of schedule. In 2012, the school enrolled 334 ninth through 12th graders in addition to 62 part-time students (Mountain Heights Academy, 2013). A partnership with Weber State University, announced in May 2012, added to the breadth and depth of courses offered as students now had the opportunity to take college courses online for concurrent credit (Lewis, 2012).

The school experienced an increase in enrollment during the 2013-2014 school year with the addition of students in seventh and eighth grades. Twenty-two faculty taught 388 full-time students, 117 part-time students, and 47 students with disabilities (Mountain Heights Academy, 2014).

In 2014-2015 the school served 479 full-time students in addition to 142 part-time students, and 65 students with disabilities with 21.5 faculty members (Mountain Heights Academy, 2015). In 2015-2016 the school served 510 students, in addition to 214 part-time students, and 65 students with disabilities with 31.5 faculty members (Mountain Heights Academy, 2016).

Based on the October 1, 2016 count, the school educated 525 full-time seventh-12th grade students in 2016-2017 and 248 part-time students. There were 79 students with disabilities in October (Mountain Heights Academy, 2016). The student-teacher ratio in 2016-2017 was

1:19.5, mainly because of the number of teachers of special education needed to accommodate the increased number of students.

Mountain Heights Academy experienced a significant enrollment increase during the 2017-2018 school year, potentially due to the closure of the state-run Electronic High School the previous spring. On October 1, the school had enrolled 624 full-time students and 252 part-time students, 95 of whom were students with disabilities (Mountain Heights Academy, 2017).

The general student population is counted on October 1 each year and includes the number of students with disabilities as well. The official students with disabilities count is conducted on December 1 annually ("UTREx," 2016). The percentage of students with disabilities increased on the October 1 count from 2.4% in 2009 to 15% in 2017 and on the December 1 count from 3.9% in 2009 to 15.4% in 2017 (cf., Table 3).

Table 3

Enrollment Data 2009-2017 at Mountain Heights Academy

Academic Year	General Education Population (n)	Special Education Population (n) Oct. 1	Percentage in Special Education	Special Education Population (n) Dec. 1	Percentage in Special Education
2009-2010	127	3	2.4	5	3.9
2010-2011	227	4	1.8	9	3.9
2011-2012	328	25	7.6	34	10.3
2012-2013	334	36	9.3	35	10.7
2013-2014	388	48	8.1	40	12.3
2014-2015	478	73	15.2	73	15.2
2015-2016	510	71	14.0	77	15.0
2016-2017	525	79	15.0	81	15.4

Based upon previous school surveys of all students, including those with disabilities, who have enrolled in this school, the data suggest that students generally come because their previous educational setting was not working for them, they value the flexibility of fitting school in around their own schedule, and they enjoy the interaction they have with their teachers (Swinton, 2017, p. 5). Parent and student preferences included the following: flexibility and the ability to work anywhere, any time; individualized teacher interaction with students; teacher and administrative responsiveness; customizable curriculum; and use of a school laptop for full-time students (Swinton, 2017, p. 5).

Curricular content is available asynchronously and can be accessed from any device so students can work anywhere and any time. Hiring teachers with instructional design skills made it possible to personalize the open educational resource curriculum to meet the needs of groups and individual students. All course work for each week is organized into weekly folders and is due at 6:00 p.m. each Friday. General education teachers are available four hours a day during office hours via chat, video conference, phone, or email to assist students as needed. They are also available by appointment outside of their office hours. The additional four hours per day teachers reach out specifically to struggling students to motivate them, to analyze data to inform curriculum modifications and improvements, to grade student work and projects and to contact parents. All administrators, faculty, and staff adhere to the school communication policy of responding to all communications within 24 hours in order to be responsive to parents and students (“Employee handbook,” 2017).

In the event a teacher is not readily available to assist a student, a 24-hour tutoring service is also available. Students can access a certified educator to tutor them in math, science,

or English through a simple click of a button. Occasionally, students are required to work with a certified tutor if they are struggling significantly.

Participants

For this study, I only considered returning families with full-time 8-12 grade students with disabilities who had an existing IEP prior to attending the school to ensure the parents and students had enough experience with this particular special education program to answer the survey and interview questions provided. Students on a 504 plan, specific to students with disabilities who needed accommodations but did not qualify for special education services, were not included because they are served by a 504 plan rather than an IEP, which is governed by a different set of laws. Additionally, the student with disabilities classifications are nuanced enough to warrant separation from students on a 504 plan even though some of the accommodations are similar in nature. On October 1, 2017, 45 of the 624 full-time students (7%) qualified for a 504 plan at the school, which could be an area of interest for future research. Students identified as needing an IEP under child find while enrolled at the school (3%) were also excluded because they did not have prior special education experiences to compare to their current experience.

I sampled the parents of students with disabilities and the students with disabilities at the school as the population of interest. The target population for the survey was the families of students with disabilities who had attended the school for at least one year. To reduce coverage and sampling error, the survey was sent to all families that met the above criteria (Creswell, 2008).

There are 13 students with disabilities codes or classifications used to identify specific disabilities, including:

1. Autism
2. Emotional disturbance
3. Speech/language impairment
4. Deaf/blindness
5. Developmental delay
6. Hearing impairment/deafness
7. Intellectual disability
8. Multiple disabilities
9. Other health impairment
10. Orthopedic impairment
11. Specific learning disability
12. Traumatic brain injury
13. Visual impairment

At this school, three of the classification categories–autism, specific learning disability, and other health impairment–represented 93.7% of students with disabilities as shown in Table 4. The students classified under specific learning disability most often display difficulty with reading and/or math, while the students classified under other health impairment are most often students with attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD).

Table 4

Students with Disabilities Student Classification Data 2009-2017 at the School

Abbre-viation		2009-2010	2010-2011	2011-2012	2012-2013	2013-2014	2014-2015	2015-2016	2016-2017
AU	Autism	0	1	4	7	6	10	14	12
BD	Emotional Disturbance	0	0	3	3	3	2	1	2
CD	Speech/Language Impairment	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	2
DB	Deaf/Blindness	0	0	0	0	0	0	1	0
DD	Developmental Delay	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
HI	Hearing Impairment/ Deafness	0	0	0	1	0	0	0	0
ID	Intellectual Disability	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
MD	Multiple Disabilities	0	0	1	0	0	0	0	1
OH	Other Health Impairment	3	4	6	5	9	15	16	17
OI	Orthopedic Impairment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
SL	Specific Learning Disability	1	3	19	17	22	45	44	45
TB	Traumatic Brain Injury	1	1	1	1	0	1	1	0
VI	Visual Impairment	0	0	0	0	0	0	0	0
	Total Percentage of Total Student Population	5 3.9%	9 3.9%	34 10.3%	35 10.7%	40 12.3%	73 15.2%	77 15.0%	79 15.4%

When the percentage of students on an IEP at this online school is viewed through the lens of the distribution of students in the separate classifications, the difference between the school, state, and national averages becomes even more disparate, showing unusually high percentages of students with autism, specific learning disability, and other health impairment as outlined in Table 5.

Table 5

National, State, and School Students with Disabilities Enrollment Percentages by Classification

Abbreviation	Classification	School Enrollment Data by Classification for ages 12-21 at Mountain Heights in 2017	State Enrollment Data by Classification For ages 6-21 in Utah in 2011	National Enrollment Data by Classification for ages 14-21 in 2015
AU	Autism	15.2	6.6	6.0
BD	Emotional Disturbance	2.5	3.5	9.4
CD	Speech/Language Impairment	2.5	21.7	2.6
DB	Deaf/Blindness	0.0	0.0	**
DD	[a]Developmental Delay	0.0	0.0	0.0
HI	Hearing Impairment/ Deafness	0.0	0.9	1.1
ID	Intellectual Disability	0.0	5.3	8.9
MD	Multiple Disabilities	1.3	2.6	2.2
OH	Other Health Impairment	21.5	8.3	16.0
OI	Orthopedic	0.0	0.3	0.8

	Impairment			
SL	Specific Learning Disability	57.0	50.1	51.0
TB	Traumatic Brain Injury	0.0	0.5	[b]
VI	Visual Impairment	0.0	0.3	[b]

Note: [a]Developmental delay is only allowed as a classification through age nine so an age 6-21 percentage cannot be calculated.
[b]Deaf-blindness, traumatic brain injury, and visual impairment are not shown because they each account for less than 0.6 percent of children served under IDEIA. Due to categories not shown, detail does not sum to total. Although rounded numbers are displayed, the figures are based on unrounded estimates.

The students with disabilities population in 2016-2017 was audited at 79 on October 1 and increased to 81 by December 1, 2017 due to incoming students at the beginning of the second quarter. Of those 81 students, 8 graduated, leaving 73 potential students with disabilities who attended in 2017-2018. Several families determined that other placement options were a better fit, so there were 58 returning students with disabilities who met the parameters for the survey. Because two of the students with disabilities had siblings on IEPs at the school, the parent population size I surveyed was n = 56. I then interviewed four parents, the one most involved with the IEP process for that family, and five students, including two siblings.

Data Collection

Survey research is generally used to identify trends and to learn more about a particular population (Creswell, 2008). I am interested in learning more about a specific subsection of an online charter school's special education population whose enrollment is outpacing that of the general education population.

The survey was specifically and carefully designed to collect the attitudes and practices of parents of and students with disabilities at this school. I collected data through the use of an

online survey in Qualtrics because that is the medium through which students and parents are typically contacted at this school. The survey included closed and semi-closed-ended questions in order to gather both quantitative and qualitative data (Creswell, 2008).

Once the surveys were completed, I reviewed the data and coded the answers thematically in order to better understand why parents and students with disabilities were choosing to enroll at this school. Using the emergent themes from the semi-closed-ended survey results, I adjusted the interview questions to solicit deeper information from several parent/student sets. I interviewed these families in order to discover additional information about why these types of families chose online learning and about their experience while at an online school, such as how their needs were or were not being met.

Survey methods. A cross-sectional survey design provided insight into the experiences, attitudes, and practices of current students with disabilities and parents at the school during the 2017-2018 school year. While surveys can be "longitudinal in nature, a study over time, or cross-sectional, a study at one point in time," I used a cross-sectional survey design in order to collect data about the special education families at one specific point in time (Creswell, 2008, p. 390). This way the information gathered may inform future decisions of the school administration and special education team and provide insights into why these families enroll.

There are various types of cross-sectional surveys: (a) attitudes and practices, (b) group comparisons, (c) community needs, (d) national assessment, and (e) program evaluation (Creswell, 2008). Orcher (2007) also identifies categorical topics of survey design, including those related to (a) scientific theories, (b) programs and services, (c) product satisfaction, (d) knowledge, (e) behaviors, and (f) attitudes and opinions. In identifying the research question as the value of a particular choice, the participants were asked to provide an opinion, to explore

their attitudes, and to be thoughtful about their practices. This survey falls into the attitudes and opinions or attitudes and practices category. Therefore, I chose attitudes and practices as the type of cross-sectional survey to measure the beliefs and opinions of special education families about their experience at the school, in addition to how those beliefs shaped their practice (Creswell, 2008).

There are "four areas of concentration in survey research: (1) sampling from a population, (2) collecting data through questionnaires or interviews, (3) designing instruments for data collection, and (4) obtaining a high response rate" (Creswell, 2008, p. 393).

I sampled the students with disabilities parents and students at the school as the population of interest. The target population for the survey were those parents and students with disabilities in families who had been enrolled in the school for a minimum of one year. To reduce coverage and sampling error, the survey was sent to all families who met the above criteria.

Surveys are an important means of gathering direct responses, especially about respondent attitudes and opinions, although Bryman (2008) contended that they can be viewed as mechanical and disconnected from real life due to an overreliance on an instrument. Another academic concern consisted of respondents providing answers they felt were more socially desirable than answers that relied on their experiences (Richman, Keisler, Weisband, & Drasgow, 1999; Yin, 2009). Therefore, a key factor in decreasing the chances of respondents saying what they thought the interviewer wanted to hear is to ask the respondent to focus on and revisit the experience or phenomenon first, then to provide an interpretation in order to more fully connect with the actual occurrence, and then to answer the question. Other factors such as incomplete memory, amount of time lapsed, and external influences might taint the respondent's

recall (Brewer, Hallman, Fielder, & Kipen, 2004), but the answers nonetheless provide insights into the respondent's overall perception of the event.

Patten (2001) highlighted the economy of using surveys while warning that this process could be plagued by low response rates. Kerlinger (1986) indicated that "returns of less than 40 or 50 percent are common" for mail-in surveys (p. 380) while Kittleson (1997) demonstrated the effectiveness of follow-up requests, showing that "reminders approximately double the response rate for email surveys" (p. 196), although the typical response rate was still 25 to 30 percent. Watt, Simpson, McKillop, and Nunn (2002) indicated that the overall response rate for online surveys sent to distance learners was 32.6%. Nulty (2008) compared response rates of paper-based and online surveys in higher education across eight universities and discovered that the response rates for online surveys were generally lower the paper-based counterparts. The researcher supposed that if surveys were delivered online and in person that the online survey response rate would increase (Nulty, 2008). Typical response rates for online surveys in Nulty's study (2008) consisted of a range of 20% to 47% percent, with an average response rate of 33%. As a result of this study, I decided to send the survey electronically initially, then to invite students and parents to take the survey in person at the back- to-school orientation session if they had not already completed it and if they had enough time to stay after the orientation. Therefore, I anticipated a 40-50% response rate from the 56 parent and 58 student combinations, which calculated to between 22-26 parent responses and 23-29 student responses.

The surveys were sent via email in late May of 2018 to the qualifying families with the invitation for the student and the parent most involved in the IEP process to participate. Follow up emails were sent over the summer, although few responses were received due to students not checking school emails and parents not attending to school matters during summer months.

Therefore, in each orientation session in mid-August of 2018, the families were asked if they had completed the emailed version of the survey. If not, the parent and the student were invited by a student services coordinator to complete the survey on a laptop provided by the school in a private room if they had time after the orientation session. I continued to follow up until I reached a minimum of 25 parent responses and 28 student responses.

In order to elicit a higher response rate, I initially sent electronic surveys via email to each family with students with disabilities that fit the criteria. The survey was deployed using a three-phase administration procedure over a three-week period of time. Each participant was a parent or a student familiar with the communication tools and protocols at this school and as such, was accustomed to receiving and participating in a variety of surveys online. Sending an online survey and requesting a response within one week adhere to the current communication protocols already established by the school. The first emails were sent with a one-week response request. Non-responders were sent a second survey request the next week and auto-texts were sent as well in order to reduce nonresponse error. I deliberately extended the time of the survey over the summer of 2018 to provide ample time for follow up reminders. As such, the survey was like a conversation, or an interview, and the design was reflective of a relationship (Champagne, 2014).

Throughout the process, IEP case managers, who communicated regularly with the students and parents, provided verbal and text reminders to complete the survey. The teachers established relationships with both the parents and the students which increased the response rate of the surveys.

Although there were still issues to be aware of, the benefits outweighed the costs of conducting survey research. Two main benefits of online surveys included the ability to reach the

masses at a fraction of the cost of mail-in counterparts and the opportunity to secure quick responses (Pitkow & Kehoe, 1996; Schmidt, 1997; Watt et al., 2002), both of which held true in this research study.

Interview methods. While the quantitative survey responses provided an overview of the experiences of special education families at this school and reduced any preconceptions I might have had as the researcher, it was important to allow for deeper qualitative research through the use of interviews. Therefore, both surveys and interviews were used in this research design, and although there were some unavoidable issues, such as lack of responsiveness to the survey during summer months for parents and students and parent rescheduling of interview times, each method played an integral role in better understanding attitudes and practices of our student and parent populations, in addition to clarifying why parents chose online education for their students, how the families' needs were being met, and what the parents' and students' experiences had been.

Data gathered from personal conversations or interviews are dependent on the context of the situation (Fontana & Frey, 2000; Silverman, 2006), although the ability to follow up and seek clarification provided a desirable benefit. Interviews were a valuable method of gathering data to provide context that may not be possible to ascertain based on quantitative answers from survey data alone, and they were particularly useful in understanding the motives for and experiences of IEP families and students choosing online education.

Mixed-methods research allows for a variety of types of qualitative data. I used the semi-structured interview method, which is phenomenological in nature, because I wanted to understand the story of how and why these families chose online learning and this particular school in addition to what their experience has been since they started. In order for the stories to

unfold appropriately, well-prepared semi-structured interview questions generally provide the best results for that particular outcome (Wengraf, 2001). Wengraf further refined the types of semi-structured interviews to distinguish between lightly structured and heavily structured interview questions depending on the desired results. Because I am interested in the overall experience of the parent and student pairs, I used the lightly-structured type of semi-structured interview method, which gave more leeway in the follow-up questions but demanded additional up-front preparation (Wengraf, 2001). For example, I needed to be extremely cognizant of my discourse because of the population I interviewed. I focused on simplifying the questions and using vocabulary that was as unambiguous as possible. The interview questions, as listed in Appendices K and O, were used to determine why families chose online learning at the school and what their experience was.

Kvale (2006) recommends separating the research from the interview questions so, rather than asking the theoretical research questions to the interviewees, I designed questions to elicit responses that asked for that information at a level that would be comfortable and understandable for each participant. I also asked multiple interview questions about each research question in order to enhance accuracy.

In order to minimize perceived bias and to improve validity, I triangulated the information between the parent and student survey and interview questions. Frequent peer debriefing with colleagues helped maintain appropriate measurement procedures.

In order to appropriately code the themes, I first employed a method colloquially referred to as "lumping" (Salda a, 2009, p. 19) due to its efficiency. This allowed me to determine broad, general macro-themes from the responses in both the semi-closed-ended responses from the surveys and the thick, rich descriptions from the interviews. For example, responses regarding

prior negative educational experiences or categories for selecting an online school were lumped together, as were decisions based on where, when, and how the student wanted to do their schooling. Inviting others into the process decreased the potential for coding according solely to my personal interpretations and biases. Therefore, I asked two online education colleagues to review the macro-themes and to provide feedback. One of the colleagues is a former administrator, current attorney for special education law, and has a background in assessment. The other colleague is also a former administrator, has a background in online education, and is trained in evaluation and assessment. Neither colleague works for the school. They were both independent third parties. During the second cycle of coding, I used a more refined process called "splitting" (Salda a, 2009, p. 20) where the lumped themes were split into more nuanced sub-themes. For example, the general theme of negative student experiences in prior educational settings were split into specifics such as bullying, health issues, and perceived lack of support from staff. On the third cycle, I again employed the help of the same two third-party education colleagues to ensure that the final themes and sub-themes were accurate representations of the survey responses and transcripts in order to ensure consistency, accuracy, and thoroughness. Each colleague individually reviewed the data and themes, offered feedback, and asked for clarification. We then met in person and I adjusted the final themes and sub-themes as necessary until we reached consensus among the three reviewers. Resulting themes and salient examples were provided in the short answer survey results section, then clarified and enriched with personal interviewee stories.

I strengthened accuracy by utilizing member checks after each interview to ensure that I correctly conveyed the parent's or student's intent. Once the content was coded thematically, I emailed each critical informant's responses and asked them to review the information. This

provided them with the opportunity to reflect on their responses, to ensure that I appropriately coded them, and verified that their intent was accurately represented thematically. I emailed the completed transcript to each interviewee, requested that they review it, and followed up by adjusting anything they felt did not accurately represent what they meant. Four of the interviewees, three students and one parent, responded that the transcripts needed no changes, while two parents submitted minor transcription errors to be fixed. Three interviewees, one student and two parents, provided updates clarifying their intent in several sections of their transcripts.

Participant selection. Once the survey data were collected and categorized, I selected the families to interview about their particular experiences at the school. I initially narrowed the potential interviewees by limiting the three parent/student pairs to interview in-depth about their experiences at the school, to the three prevalent special education classifications, autism (AU), other health impairment (OHI), and specific learning disability, (SLD). Then, through purposeful sampling (Patton, 2002) centered around the themes from the survey I selected one parent-student pair from each of the three categories. Purposeful sampling enhanced efficiency while allowing the researcher to select knowledgeable participants about a particular phenomenon in order to provide an information-rich experience (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Upon completing the first three pairs of interviews, I determined I needed additional perspectives, per Patton's (2002) "purposeful sampling" guidelines, therefore I interviewed another family consisting of a parent and two siblings for a total of four parents and five students. Both of these students were also categorized in the three prevalent special education classifications of AU, OHI, and SLD.

Therefore, I interviewed nine critical informants–four parents and five students individually–in keeping with typical practices within phenomenological research guidelines, which are generally acceptable in similar studies (Patton, 2002). The thick, rich description gathered from these nine critical informants provided deeper insight into the trends gathered from the survey.

Each interview participant was invited to be interviewed in person or via video conference in order to observe paralinguistic cues in addition to listening to what they said. Interviewing the parent and the student separately reduced response bias or suggestibility based on the responses of the other person prior to having had time to form their own thoughts. While this doubled the amount of time it took to complete the interviews, it also strengthened accuracy by insulating each interviewee from the other family member's opinion. This step also helped to compare and contrast the experiential stories of two parties describing their separate perceptions of the same event.

In order to personalize the experiences of each interview participant and to help track their individual stories, I assigned pseudonyms rather than numbers or letters as a way to identify them. I also used pseudonyms for all of the teachers referenced by the parents or students. All of the interviewees were Caucasian.

Table 6

Interviewees

Family Name	First Name	Role
Anderson	Allison	Parent
	Ashley	18-year-old female student
Brown	Benjamin	Parent
	Brady	15-year-old male student
	Brinley	15-year-old female student
Carter	Cassandra	Parent
	Cameron	16-year-old male student
Davis	Danielle	Parent
	Drake	17-year-old male student

I interviewed four student and parent pairs. Rather than refer to each family as Family A, B, C, or D, I have provided them with a correlating name, Anderson, Brown, Carter, and Davis, to personalize the responses. The actual family names have been changed to protect their privacy. I have also included a brief biography of each family I interviewed to give some insights into their background so the reader knows who they are when they are referenced. I interviewed two female and three male students between the ages of 15 and 18, and three female and one male parent. The students are fairly representative of the population of students with disabilities at the school in terms of their classifications of AU, OHI, and SLD.

Anderson family. The Andersons are the parents of seven children, five adult sons and two adopted daughters. Both daughters have attended Mountain Heights Academy. Allison, the mother, has provided a range of educational options for her children, including homeschooling, public schooling, other online options, and adult education options. She is well-versed in the

types of options available. Ashley is the youngest daughter, although occasionally, Allison references Ashley's older sister in the interviews.

Ashley has attended the school for three years after having tried a variety of other district, and online options, and she is focused on graduating this year. She is looking forward to living on her own with her friend and taking classes at the local community college. Ashley is interested in a job that has something to do with animals.

Brown family. The Browns have four children, three of whom have attended Mountain Heights. Benjamin, the father, comes from a traditional schooling background. His mother was a district school teacher, and he did not hold a favorable view of charter schools, especially online charter schools, prior to his children experiencing difficulties in their neighborhood schools. In the interview, Benjamin occasionally refers to his son who graduated from the school a couple of years ago. Since that time, his two youngest children, 10th grade twins named Brady and Brinley, are now students at the school. Benjamin mentions his own struggles with a learning disability during the interview. He is in a sales position, and he travels occasionally for his job.

Brady and Brinley first became acquainted with the school when their older brother started attending. They were too young to come the school at that time, but they came to the family activities at the school. Brady and Brinley attended a traditional district school through sixth grade and then they tried a brick-and-mortar charter school for two years. Two years ago, as 8th grade students, the family was told that they would never graduate from high school, which was the catalyst that prompted them to switch to Mountain Heights Academy. Brady, especially, was upset at being told that he would not be able to graduate and he wanted to find a school that believed in him. The 2018-2019 school year is their second year at the school. Brady

loves gaming and all the social activities at Mountain Heights. Brinley is interested in all things related to Paris and also loves coming to the social activities at the school.

Carter family. Cassandra is a traditional district school proponent, meaning she was not typically supportive of charter schools initially. She works in the medical field, and she teaches classes at a local technical college. Cassandra is a strong advocate for her son, Cameron, who struggled with reading through elementary school in his local district setting. Cameron knew from the time he was in third grade that he was different and the "odd man out." He was two grade levels behind in reading, but he was not "a behavior problem," so his mother felt like the school let him move along without challenging him to do more. Cameron could make friends easily–he "made a new one every day,"–he just could not manage to consistently *keep* them. He felt like he was "living in the shadows."

Cassandra became concerned about Cameron's lack of progress in fifth grade, and the principal suggested he may be a good candidate for the district online elementary option. It worked well for him in sixth grade, but it was not an available option in seventh grade. The Carters heard a radio advertisement for Mountain Heights and did some research on the school before having Cameron enroll in 7th grade.

Cameron is now in 10th grade and enjoys extreme sports and any social activity at the school. He is a strong self-advocate and knows how to communicate to his teachers when and how he needs help. He recognizes that other students may be struggling like he used to socially and goes out of his way to make sure those students feel included at social activities.

Davis family. The Davis family is in their second year at the school. Danielle works as an advocate for patients' rights and knows how to do the same for her son, Drake, who has struggled in school since Kindergarten. They had been searching for the right fit for him for a

decade and had tried district schools, traditional charter schools, other online charter schools, and finally Mountain Heights Academy.

Drake is self-aware and able to articulate his strengths and shortcomings with a high degree of accuracy. He has a job at Subway and is starting his own business as a videogame designer. Drake is also looking forward to graduating in a couple of years and being completely in charge of his own life.

Researcher Positionality

I was the researcher responsible for gathering information, designing and administering the survey, conducting interviews, and analyzing data. I am deeply involved in advocating for students with disabilities and their educational well-being. While this level of involvement provided me with many insights and advantages in conducting this study, it also required that I carefully consider how my role and position affected how I carry out the research. Due to the sensitive nature of our students with disabilities and their educational situations, doing interviews with a known entity yielded more accurate results, more accurate in terms of volume and in terms of the nature of the discussions, than asking them to open up about their educational experiences with an unknown third party. It often takes a full year to establish a relationship of trust with the parents and students (Shelden, Angell, Stoner, & Roseland, 2010). Because I had worked with each of them for at least one year, my supposition is that they felt more comfortable talking with me about their experiences than they would have with an unknown third party.

My positions as educator, administrator, and authorizer have provided me with a breadth of opportunities to better understand online education, charter schools, and students with disabilities. I have been involved with online charter schools since 2003, and with this particular online school since 2008, which provided me with an understanding of the evolution of the IEP

process in online education over the past 15 years, thus allowing for better insights into the current processes. I also realize the impact that online education could have on the individualization required for students with disabilities while recognizing that I may be biased toward seeing positive outcomes more readily than negative outcomes. As a result, it was important to work closely with the third-party reviewers to ensure that the information was presented in an authentic and realistic manner. Finally, as a member of the online education community I also have a general interest in determining how to successfully implement online special education, an area that has been sorely lacking in quality.

As an administrator, I attended annual special education law conferences and consistently reviewed information about IDEIA and its implementation. I am also a member of the Utah State Charter School Board and regularly review and evaluate how well charter schools are performing. Not only do I have a specific interest in this particular school, I have a general interest in the overall success of charter schools and their implementation of special education programs as a member of the largest authorizing entity in Utah.

An examination of "researcher subjectivity" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 124) or researcher bias allowed me to thoroughly explore it, which is the best way to counteract it. As the principal of the school I am researching I have a vested interest in ensuring that the needs of our families and students are being met. My assumptions in conducting this research stem partially from prior surveys that included a 97% satisfaction rating with the school overall (Mountain Heights Academy, 2016). Additionally, parents and students cite three main reasons for their high levels of satisfaction: flexibility, student-teacher interaction and access, and customized curriculum (Mountain Heights Academy, 2016). I am interested in determining if these general results hold true for the specific target population of students with disabilities and their families.

My intent is for the survey data to diminish the potential for bias by providing an opportunity to give feedback confidentially that balanced out any interview data I received that may be colored. The survey was conducted confidentially to hopefully diminish responses that sounded like parents and students were just telling me what I wanted to hear. It was clear in the consent forms that student enrollment and treatment by the school were not in jeopardy if parents or students provided negative feedback. Additionally, third party reviewers participated in the survey and interview question coding process on the first and third rounds to ensure authenticity and to reduce bias.

Because I have established relationships with these families and am a known entity, they opened up and were willing to provide more information than they typically would to an unknown third party. There was an initial concern that they may be have been tempted to adapt their responses to make them more positive and that they may have been uncomfortable sharing the negative pieces of their experience. I made it clear in the consent forms that there is no penalty for non-participation or for honesty. In each interview I took time to ensure that the parent and the student were comfortable answering honestly and with the understanding that this was an experiential interview designed to elicit their personal stories with no right or wrong answers. Additionally, by interviewing the student and the parent separately, I was able to compare their stories and reduce hyperbole.

Being aware of the potential for subjectivity, exploring it, and intentionally taking steps to reduce it allowed me to leverage the strengths of my professional experience without sacrificing authenticity. Providing explicit descriptions of my processes, assumptions, and biases better helped my readers to interpret the trustworthiness and transferability of my results.

Resources

Two types of data were analyzed for this project: parent and student survey data and parent and student interview data. For the survey data, an account for a third-party survey company, in this case, Qualtrics, was acquired, along with the use of a laptop computer on which to present the questions. For the interviews, resources included a laptop computer and an internet connection, along with a recording application on the laptop. Since parents and students spent a significant amount of time participating in the interview, a $25 gift card was provided for each of the nine participants. The total participation cost for parents and students was $225. One family drove to the Mountain Heights office specifically for the interview and was reimbursed for mileage at a rate of $0.53 per mile for a total mileage reimbursement cost of $25, while two of the families were already at the office for other activities and opted to stay after for the interviews; therefore no mileage reimbursement was warranted. Two education experts reviewed and checked the themes through the lumping and splitting processes. They were compensated $50 each for their time. The total cost for resources was $350.

Table 7

Resources

Resource	Cost per resource	Number / Amount	Total Amount
Interviewees	$25	9	$225
Mileage	$0.53 per mile	47.1	$25
Experts to review themes	$50	2	$100
Total			$350

Limitations and Delimitations

The limitations of this research included a relatively small sample size, n = 56 parents and n = 58 students, although it is not small in comparison to the general population. One delimitation may be that the boundaried results affected one school and may not be wholly applicable outside the context of this particular online model and school setting since online models vary greatly in their scope and type. However, there may be elements of best practices that are transferable to any online setting. Despite the limitations and delimitations, the results of this research will be useful to the administration, special education department, and special education families at this online school. The results will help improve the overall educational experience for future families. Additionally, the information can be useful to similar institutions as anecdotal data to encourage further research in this area and to researchers. And finally, educational practices that are discovered during this process may be used as indicators of sound online pedagogy that other online models may choose to implement.

CHAPTER 4

Results

In order to analyze survey results, I implemented the following procedures. I descriptively analyzed the data to identify general trends by calculating a table of mean, variance, range, median, mode, and interquartile range for each question on the instrument for parents and also for students. I then developed a demographic profile of the sample. Lastly, I created a report and included a Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of internal consistency to determine reliability (Creswell, 2008).

The survey response data were analyzed based on mean, variance, range, median, mode, and interquartile range based on a four-point Likert scale of 1 for *strongly agree* to 4 for *strongly disagree* as shown in Table 8. Therefore, the lower the number for the mean, the stronger the agreement.

Table 8

Survey Response Data—Parents (29/56)

Question	Mean	Variance	Range	Median	Mode	Interquartile Range
1. Flexibility	1.72	0.56	2	2.0	1	1.0
2. Online	1.41	0.32	2	1.0	1	1.0
3. Teachers	1.45	0.40	2	1.0	1	1.0
4. Curriculum	1.97	0.32	2	2.0	2	0.0
5. Students as Decision-makers	1.90	0.81	3	2.0	1	2.0
6. Previous school not a good fit	1.38	0.46	2	1.0	1	0.0
7. Laptop	2.76	0.83	3	3.0	3	0.0

The parent survey was distributed to 56 parents of students with disabilities and 29 parents completed the survey for a response rate of 52%, which is slightly above the anticipated 40-50% response rate range. The survey was sent out to parents in the late spring, again over the summer, and due to the lack of responsiveness during the summer months when school was not in session, it was again sent electronically in August and made available at student orientation.

Table 9

Survey Response Data—Students (30/58)

Question	Mean	Variance	Range	Median	Mode	Interquartile Range
1. Flexibility	1.57	.59	3	1.0	1	1.0
2. Online learning	1.83	.49	3	2.0	2	1.0
3. Teacher availability	1.73	.68	3	2.0	2	1.0
4. Curriculum	2.10	.71	3	2.0	2	0.0
5. Students as Decision-makers	2.67	1.1	3	3.0	3	2.0
6. “Fit” of previous school	1.70	.77	3	1.5	1	1.0
7. Availability of laptop	2.73	.96	3	3.0	3	1.25

The following information about parent demographics is represented in Table 10 and includes gender, age range, ethnicity, grade level of student, and which quarter their student started at the school.

Table 10

Survey: Parent Demographics

Category	Sub-category	Number of Parents
Gender	Male	3
	Female	26
Age Range	25-35	1
	35-45	18
	45-55	8
Ethnicity	White	28
	American Indian or Alaskan Native	1
Student Grade Level	7th Grade	9
	8th Grade	4
	9th Grade	8
	10th Grade	5
	11th Grade	2
	12th Grade	1
Quarter Student Started at School	Quarter 1	19
	Quarter 2	6
	Quarter 3	4
	Quarter 4	0

Note. Not all totals equal 29 because some parents did not answer all the questions.

The student survey was distributed to 58 students with disabilities, and thirty students completed the survey, for a response rate of 52%, which was slightly higher than the 40-50% completion rate range I anticipated. The survey was sent out to students in the late spring, again over the summer, and due to the lack of responsiveness during the summer months when school

was not in session, it was again sent electronically in August and made available at student orientation. The following information about student demographics is represented in Table 11 and included gender, ethnicity, grade level of student, and which quarter the student started at the school. Of note, there was also one "super senior" in 12+ grade, meaning the student returned after the senior year to complete a diploma. This is allowed under IDEIA, which determines that students have until the day before their 22nd birthday to complete the requirements for graduation as long as the IEP team deems that they are continuing to make progress.

Table 11

Survey: Student Demographics

Category	Sub-category	Number of Students
Gender	Male	18
	Female	12
Ethnicity	White	24
	Hispanic or Latino	3
	American Indian or Alaskan Native	2
	Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	1
Student Grade Level	9th Grade	8
	10th Grade	8
	11th Grade	9
	12th Grade	4
	12th+ Grade	1
Quarter Started at School	Quarter 1	19
	Quarter 2	6
	Quarter 3	5
	Quarter 4	0

In this project, I gathered ordinal data from students and parents based on their answers to the survey questions. For ordinal data, two statistical techniques can be used to determine correlation between the individual questions, Kendall's Tau and Spearman's Rho. While Kendall's Tau, based on concordant and discordant pairs in the data, yields smaller values for the correlation coefficients, because of the small size of the data set involved (n = 29 parents and n = 30 students), it was a better choice than Spearman's Rho, which is based on deviations in the data (Lani, 2018).

SPSS was used to determine the inter-question correlations for three combinations of the data gathered. First, the parent and student surveys were grouped together, and correlations were determined as shown in the table below. Next, the students' correlations were calculated and were outlined in the student survey section. Lastly, the parents' correlations were determined and were highlighted in the parent survey section.

Table 11 shows that question 1, "My student chose to attend because of the flexible schedule," most often correlated with other questions. Specific examples included the following:

- Question 3, "My student chose to attend because of the teachers,"
- Question 4, "My student chose to attend because of the class lessons,"
- Question 5, "My student made the decision to attend the school," and
- Question 7, "My student chose to attend because they received a laptop."

Thus, flexibility is a predicting factor of four other questions, which is logical because flexibility is attached to the nature of the school.

Another way to view the question-to-question correlations is to identify questions that are always correlated. In this case, question 1, "My student chose to attend because of the flexible schedule," was always correlated with the following questions:

- Question 3, “My student chose to attend because of the teachers,” and
- Question 4, “My student chose to attend because of the class lessons,” in the parent and student surveys together, the student surveys alone, and the parent surveys alone.

This communicates that both parents and students hold the same view that a flexible schedule is an important factor in selecting the school, as are the teachers, who have the flexibility to work with students, and the class lessons, which can be adapted to meet student needs.

Table 12

Question to Question Correlations

Surveys included		Q2 Online	Q3 Teachers	Q4 Curriculum	Q5 Decision makers	Q6 Previous school not a good fit	Q7 Laptop
Parent and student surveys together ($N = 59$)	Q1 Flexibility	NS	.361[b] *.003*	.262[a] *.028*	.245[a] *.033*	NS	.281[a] *.015*
	Q2 Online		.269[a] *.029*	NS	NS	NS	NS
	Q3 Teachers			.421[b] *< .000*	NS	NS	NS
	Q4 Curriculum				NS	.258[a] *.031*	.305[b] *.008*
	Q5 Decision makers					NS	.229[a] *.039*
	Q6 Previous school not a good fit						NS
		Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7
Student surveys alone ($N = 30$)	Q1	NS	.421[a] *.014*	NS	NS	NS	NS
	Q2		NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
	Q3			.465[b] *.006*	NS	NS	.384[a] *.020*
	Q4				NS	NS	.380[a] *.019*
	Q5					NS	NS
	Q6						NS
		Q2	Q3	Q4	Q5	Q6	Q7
Parent surveys alone ($N = 29$)	Q1	NS	.361[a] *.039*	NS	.495[b] *.003*	NS	NS
	Q2		NS	NS	NS	NS	NS
	Q3			.370[a] *.037*	NS	.382[a] *.032*	NS
	Q4				NS	NS	NS

Note: [a]Correlation is significant at the .05 level (2-tailed).
[b]Correlation is significant at the .01 level (2-tailed).

Parent Surveys

For the survey responses, parents strongly agreed that the two main reasons they chose to have their students attend this school were that their previous school was not a good fit and that Mountain Heights was online. They also strongly agreed that the teachers were one of the main reasons for selecting the school. The least relevant reason for selecting the school was the use of the laptop, as outlined in the table below.

Table 13

Parent Survey Responses

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Flexibility	47%	37%	17%	0%
2. Online	63%	37%	0%	0%
3. Teachers	57%	33%	10%	0%
4. Class lessons	17%	67%	17%	0%
5. Students as decision-makers	43%	33%	23%	0%
6. Previous school was not a good fit	70%	17%	13%	0%
7. Laptop	13%	27%	43%	17%

In reviewing the statistical analysis for the parent survey, one of the significant correlations was between question 1, “My student chose to attend the school because of the flexible schedule” and question 5, “My student made the decision to attend the school,” $r(27) = .50$, $p = .003$. Question 3, “I chose to send my student to the school because of the teachers at Mountain Heights Academy,” and question 4, “I chose to send my student to the school because of the curriculum,” appeared often in the list of significant correlations. This could indicate that

having teachers available to meet with their students, in addition to the teachers' ability to adapt the curriculum was a strong attraction for parents selecting the school.

Individual reasons for attending. The first survey question was open-ended and asked what the main reason was that parents decided to have their student attend the school. Most answers included more than one reason for changing schools and were categorized into two main themes of (a) learning environment and (b) student experience. Both of these themes emerged from the analysis of the short answer survey responses.

The learning environment theme was comprised of four sub-themes: (a) when or schedule and flexibility, defined as when student learning took place; (b) where or location, meaning where the learning took place; (c) how or online, defined as the mode in which students were learning, or in other words, how they were learning; and (d) self-determination, defined as the ability to make decisions for themselves.

The student experience theme included four sub-themes: (a) bullying and general concern about attending school for social and emotional reasons; (b) disability and accommodations, meaning the student's disability and need for accommodation as a factor in selecting a different school; (c) academics, meaning the student was struggling and not receiving the needed support; and (d) teachers, meaning the student was looking for increased teacher interaction and support.

Thus, there were two main themes: (a) learning environment and (b) student experience. There were several sub-themes supported by multiple examples that prompted parents to seek a different educational experience and to enroll their student at the school. The main themes and sub-themes are represented in the table below.

Table 14

Themes from Parent Survey Responses Question 1

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Number of Responses
Learning Environment	When (Schedule/Flexibility)	3
	Where (Location)	8
	How (Online)	8
	Self-determination	9
	Total	28
Student Experience	Bullying	11
	Disability/Accommodations	14
	Academics	7
	Teachers	7
	Total	39

Learning environment. Twenty-eight parent responses indicated that a change of learning environment was one of the main reasons they decided to have their student attend the school. Parents liked being able to choose when, where, and how their families were going to go to school, in addition to having a say in their educational experience.

Schedule and flexibility. Three parents mentioned choosing Mountain Heights because of the flexibility and the ability to do school on their own time. For example, one parent shared that her "children attend Mountain Heights mainly for the flexibility it provides." Another parent talked about the long vacations they take and how his student can work ahead and not be penalized for missing school. Lastly, one parent mentioned that if her daughter is feeling overwhelmed, she can "delay having her start for the day until she feels better and is ready to

start into her classes." Thus, parents felt it was important for their children to be able to do their schoolwork on a flexible schedule that worked for them.

Where: Location. Parents generally felt the online setting provided reduced distractions, a higher degree of safety, and a quieter work space. Consequently, eight parents included a statement about the location of their students' school as a reason for choosing the school. For example, one parent said, "My daughter is home safe while doing school." Another shared that, "the reduced distractions and quiet, familiar atmosphere of home helped her focus on her studies better." And one parent indicated that her son had anxiety and had a hard time functioning in a regular school so "having him attend at home has been a great option for him." Some parents shared concerns about their students not being ready or mature enough to move to a junior high/high school setting, particularly one parent who said that her son needed "a different learning experience away from the big high school." For another parent it was her own poor health that made it more convenient for her to have her child home doing school online. Overall, many parents, for multiple reasons, determined that where their students went to school was one of the main reasons for choosing Mountain Heights. Thus, a change of location was a main reason for attending Mountain Heights.

Online. Eight parents mentioned how the student was learning, mostly that their students were in an online setting, working according to their individual needs. One parent shared that her daughter has been attending this school for three years and "she can go at her own pace." As a result of the school being online, three parents included comments about the perceived benefit of switching schools based on increased access to student performance information and a greater ability to watch schoolwork and progress themselves. For example, one parent shared that, "we could track closer and keep him up to speed with assignments," while another parent said, "I love

the school. They are organized, the kids can go at their own pace, lessons can be watched over and over (the teachers usually record the lessons).” Therefore, the online component of the school was one of the main reasons parents chose to have their children attend Mountain Heights.

Self-determination. A desire for student self-determination appeared in 10 parent responses. One parent of two students said that for her younger son the parents chose to have him attend Mountain Heights “to have more of a voice with his education,” a sentiment echoed by a second parent. Another parent shared that “finding this school was an answer to a prayer.” Thus, the concept of having a voice, being heard, and feeling they matter seemed important to parents. For parents and students, being able to choose when, where, and how to do their schoolwork appeared to provide an opportunity for them to exercise that voice and choice.

Student experience. Thirty-two parent responses included an element of seeking a different educational option because of student experiences at their previous school that their new school helped to address.

Bullying. For parents, the way their students were treated by peers or staff, which included bullying, physical assault, and, in one case, sexual assault emerged in 11 parent responses. One parent shared that a group of boys had her son on the ground kicking him and even though the school had it on video “nothing was done.” Another parent wanted to take her student “away from the kids who were bullying [him].” Three parents shared that there had been poor treatment of their children by staff, which included a perceived lack of general support. This poor treatment was communicated in terms of lacking (a) helpfulness, (b) caring, (c) trust, (d) responsiveness, and (e) understanding. Thus, parents were looking for a way to remove their children from bullies and to find supportive staff.

Disability/accommodations. This sub-theme elicited responses from 14 parents and included multiple instances of a student's disability accommodations not being met in a way that was satisfactory to the parent. This prompted the parent to seek an alternative educational option. One parent shared that the local school was "not following her [daughter's] IEP, not providing FAPE, and she was physically injured at school." Two parents said that despite having IEPs their students did not receive the help they needed. Another parent communicated that her son "wasn't getting the help he needed as a student with disabilities." The same problem was echoed by another parent who said, "They did not help with her school work even though she had an IEP." One parent was concerned that "the teachers didn't understand her autism or emotional needs." Another felt that the student "was not able to get the special services needed to succeed." One parent felt that, "laws were broken and then my child faced harassment from the special education director and principal." Based on these and other experiences, parents perceived that their children's disabilities were not being adequately accommodated and looked elsewhere for a school.

Academics. Seven parent responses included concerns about their students' academic performance with three parents indicating that their student was failing or falling behind in school. One parent explained that "he was struggling with reading so bad and it was affecting EVERYTHING else." One parent shared that her son was struggling academically in his previous school, even in his directed studies class, a study hall class designed specifically to help students with disabilities. Another parent grew concerned as she watched as her daughter's "enthusiasm for school studies diminished." Due to their students' academic struggles these parents determined that finding a different placement would be in their best interest.

Teachers. Seven parent responses indicated that increased positive teacher interaction was a main reason for choosing the school. Five parents specifically mentioned the phrase, "more one-on-one teacher interaction" in describing asking for help and receiving it, and one additional family was looking for an opportunity for "more one-on-one time with teachers." One parent shared that "the teachers [at Mountain Heights] truly care about the success of all students." Therefore, parents were seeking increased teacher support by choosing a different school.

Thus, many parents sought a different educational option for their students as a result of the negative experiences their students had in their prior school setting particularly in the areas of bullying, disability/accommodation, and academics. As they made the decision to look for a different option, they were interested in seeking increased teacher support and more one-on-one time with teachers.

In summary, the first main reason parents decided to send their students to the school was to search for a different learning environment so they could choose when, how, and where their students would participate in school. The second main reason was to find a different type of student experience that was free of bullies, that accommodated their disabilities, that provided academic support, and that provided access to teachers.

The next set of survey questions asked the parent to rate possible reasons for choosing the school on a Likert-scale that included *strongly agree, agree, disagree,* and *strongly disagree* for the following items: (a) flexibility; (b) online learning; (c) teacher availability; (d) curriculum; (e) students as decision-makers; (f) "fit" of previous school; and (g) availability of laptop.

Flexibility. Thirteen parents strongly agreed and 10 parents agreed that having a flexible schedule was one of the reasons they chose to have their student attend. Four parents selected

that they disagreed and none of the parents said that they disagreed strongly with flexibility as one of the reasons for selecting Mountain Heights as an educational option for their student. Twenty-two parents also provided a short answer response that included multiple examples of how the school is flexible for their student. The main themes that emerged were: (a) learning environment, with sub-themes of when the learning takes place, where the learning takes place, and how the students learn online, and (b) student experience, with sub-themes of health and teachers.

Eleven parents mentioned the flexible schedule in terms of determining when school would take place as one of the main reasons for coming to the school. Three parents stated taking breaks and working ahead as examples of flexibility. Another three identified the benefits of designing one's own schedule, which included taking breaks, spending more time with family, and having additional time to perform service. One parent shared, "They were able to help at the local elementary school during the day and still be able to get their school work completed." Therefore, determining one's own schedule and choosing when to participate in school was an important aspect of choosing the school.

Learning environment and the learning location came next with eight parents citing the environment including specific comments about the location. Examples included being able to learn anywhere, such as at the hospital, at a day treatment center, and while traveling. Two responses specifically mentioned traveling as reasons that Mountain Heights is a flexible option. One parent liked being able to "take classes anywhere." Another parent said, "As a self-employed parent, I travel a lot and having to monitor and take my son with me it helps to have a very flexible schedule." As a result, the location provided flexibility to parents by allowing students to learn anywhere.

Six parents highlighted the pacing in the online learning environment and how that provided the flexibility they wanted. For example, three parents used the phrase “at their own pace” to articulate how flexibility works for them in the online setting. The responses ranged from the students being able to watch the recorded lessons as needed to being able to take breaks when they felt overwhelmed. For example, one parent shared, “It allowed them to process information at their own pace.” Consequently, having the ability to determine pacing was an important factor in selecting Mountain Heights for its flexibility.

Five parents cited disability or accommodation related concerns as a reason for needing extra flexibility. One parent mentioned that her student sets his own schedule and is rested when he does his school work which improves his physical and mental health. Another parent said that the student can become overwhelmed but the flexibility allows her to start the next day. One parent shared that when her students feel well, they can work more. One of those five parents shared that her son had a hard time being in a brick-and-mortar all day, while other comments included references to being unable to attend due to health reasons. For example, one parent of two students said that her children “deal with very severe health issues on a daily basis. Some days were not good ones and other days we would be traveling four hours to meet with specialists.” As an example, one parent shared that her son has ADD and felt frustrated in his previous setting while at Mountain Heights “he can take breaks when he starts to lose focus. He can stretch, go for a walk, take a bath.” Thus, students have the flexibility to adapt their schedule to meet their personal learning needs when it comes to their own health.

Four parents mentioned teacher-facilitated flexibility and that the teachers made themselves available to help as needed. One parent said that the school allows the student to “get individualized help.” Another parent said that teachers care about student success. One parent

liked that her student could contact teachers for additional help when he was struggling, and another appreciated how teachers have flexibility with their time in order to work with their students. Another parent said that teachers care about students' success. One parent liked that her student could contact teachers for additional help when he was struggling and another appreciated how teachers have flexibility with their time in order to work with their students. Thus, teachers having the flexibility to be available to help students appeals to parents.

While the vast majority of parents agreed that flexibility was one of the main reasons for choosing the school based on learning environment, health, and teachers, there was one parent who did not feel the school was as flexible as she had hoped and found the late work policy challenging to navigate for her daughter.

Online learning. Out of the 27 responses, 17 parents strongly agreed while seven parents agreed that they chose to have their students attend the school because it is online. When asked whether online learning worked for their student, the responses included a wide range of affirmative reasons including learning environment, self-determination, health, life skills, and accommodations.

Eleven parents indicated the location of the online learning was helpful. Nine of those 11 parents included fewer distractions, greater focus, and a quieter environment as reasons for liking the online environment. For example, one parent responded that "it does work for my student because she has fewer distractions and a quiet place to work" while another shared that his daughter "could focus better than in a traditional class." Two parents shared that the technology keeps students from losing assignments and allows them to access content multiple times. One parent said it gives his son "the ability to read and re-read things if he needs." Therefore, choosing where to learn is important to parents.

Ten parents said their student liked online learning for the scheduling benefits. Six parents indicated they liked online because they had the ability to choose when to do their schoolwork as far as pacing and timing. One parent shared that the student enjoyed "the ability to work on school outside of school hours if needed," for example. Two additional parents included flexibility, while one liked the flexibility and the other did not think it was flexible enough. Overall parents like that their students can choose when and how they learn.

Twelve parents mentioned health as one of the reasons why online learning was working for their student. Two parents specifically mentioned health-related scheduling as they could fit school in around doctor's appointments and surgeries. As one parent said, her student could still do school and "recover from surgeries." Seven of those comments focused on mental, emotional, and physical health due to decreased social anxiety, peer pressure, and bullying. One parent included that online learning worked well because her son is often sick. Five parents shared that their students had an increase of self-confidence and self-esteem, a reduction of stress and peer pressure, while one parent commented that her student was able to participate as well as other students even with her severe disabilities. She said that her daughter had a hard time "hearing above the noise of her classmates." She also said that at Mountain Heights she can "zoom in to see materials better which she couldn't do in a regular classroom," which has "helped improve her academic performance." Therefore, Mountain Heights allows students to attend school in ways they may not have otherwise been able to previously, which parents seem to appreciate.

Ten parents mentioned preparation for college, career, or developing a helpful life skill. Six responses included information about being prepared for college and career because students could focus on learning, improving academic performance, and having access to a variety of courses unavailable at their local school. Two of those parents also mentioned that it was hard

for their students at first and became easier with time. Four parents noted online learning as a way to learn life skills, such as keeping a weekly calendar and meeting deadlines, learning to prioritize schedules, working unsupervised, being accountable to show work and putting in the adequate time. One parent stated his son was "better prepared for college and the real world because he learned how to prioritize his schedule and tasks. He learned to work unsupervised." As a result, several parents felt that the online nature of the school was teaching their students valuable life skills.

Six parents mentioned a variety of accommodations. One parent said that "typing is great because of lack of fine motor skills," while another mentioned that listening to content works well. One parent said that online learning allowed her student to spend "more one on one time with teachers." Two parents shared that rereading as needed or rewatching a lesson if the student misses something is helpful. Parents appreciated the embedded accommodations available in the online learning setting.

Lastly, one parent indicated that the academic rigor was difficult because it was "harder than a regular school, and my daughter spends time teaching herself."

Overall, parents believed online learning works for their student because of the (a) learning environment, (b) self-determination, (c) health, (d) life skills, and (e) accommodations available at the school.

Teacher availability. When asked to describe their student's experience with teacher availability, out of the 27 responses, 16 parents strongly agreed while nine parents agreed that they chose to have their students attend the school because the teachers are available to help them. Two parents disagreed and none of the parents strongly disagreed. When asked to describe their experience with teacher availability fifteen parents indicated that teachers were available,

one said they were mostly available, and one said they were not available. One parent stated that teacher availability was “one of the biggest reasons we chose MHA” while another parent indicated her daughter “had that challenge of teachers not being readily available to help her when she needs it.” Aside from availability, parents also made comments about teacher affect, teacher pedagogy, course content, and the degree to which the teacher benefits their student.

Three parents indicated the teachers were helpful and caring, while three said they were proactive in reaching out to students. For example, one parent said her daughter had “so many teachers helping her succeed. The teachers reached out to both her and I if she started to fall behind. The teachers were absolutely amazing and very available.” Thus, the teachers are not only available, but there is also a perception that they care about students.

Three parents included one-on-one instruction and pedagogy in their responses, while two identified accommodating their student as a factor. As an example, one parent stated that “the teachers were readily available and provided more one on one time than students receive during traditional school.” One parent indicated that her son was resistant to talking with teachers in person so “being able to email and chat were less overwhelming.” Therefore, parents perceived that teachers were approachable and helpful.

One parent said that the course content being online allows the teachers more time to work with students. She said that teachers “only give the lecture once and record it” and her son is definitely “receiving more help” than before. Parents seemed to appreciate that teachers had more time to work with students.

As far as the degree to which teachers benefit students, one parent said it was the biggest factor in the decision to attend, while one said it was not a factor. Three other parents said the

teachers are great, good, and beneficial. So, parents seemed to agree generally that teachers benefit the students.

Parents also tended to agree that teacher availability was a determining factor in selecting the school and also mentioned teacher affect, teacher pedagogy, course content, and the degree to which the teacher benefits the student.

Curriculum. When asked if parents chose to have their students attend the school because of the class lessons, defined as what is taught in the classes, out of the 27 responses, four parents strongly agreed while 19 parents agreed. Four parents disagreed and none of the parents strongly disagreed. When asked to describe their experience with their students' class lessons, parents provided a wide range of responses including positive feedback, neutral responses, and varied responses.

Twenty-one parents provided positive feedback including some of the following adjectives: interesting, rigorous, thoughtful, fine, very good, simple, easy to understand, adaptable, and designed for learning. For example, one parent said, "I feel like he gets more information than he would in traditional school" and another parent shared that she "appreciates the rigorous and thoughtful curriculum." The majority of parents provided positive responses regarding the course lessons.

Two parents provided neutral responses and indicated that the course lessons were not a factor in their decision to select the school for their student to attend. As an example, one parent said they are "the same class lessons that are taught in public school." Another shared that they had "no idea beforehand" what the class lessons were like. Only two parents provided neutral responses.

Two parents mentioned accommodations as part of the interest in class lessons. For example, one parent discussed how accommodating MHA was with adjusting the workload to meet the accommodations in her daughter's IEP if there is "too much for her to finish in a week." One parent mentioned pacing, teacher availability, and control over course choice. Four parents included varied responses that were neither positive nor negative, and it seems that none of the responses were clearly negative.

Overall, the class lessons received positive feedback, but they do not seem to be a main consideration in deciding to attend the school.

Students as decision makers. Out of the 27 responses, 12 parents strongly agreed while nine parents agreed that they chose to have their students attend the school because the student wanted to come. Six parents disagreed and none of the parents strongly disagreed. Twenty-six parents provided a response to the short answer question on how they felt about their student deciding to come to the school. The responses fell into the following themes: (a) Parents decided, (b) Students decided, and (c) Parents and students decided together.

The six parents who disagreed indicated they made the decision, not the student. Seventeen parents mentioned relying on their feelings to make the decision and included phrases like knowing it was "the right choice" and "leap of faith." Others expressed having "mixed feelings," or being "nervous at first," or they "weren't too sure," but "now they love it and don't want to go back to a regular school." One parent was "worried about socialization with peers" his son's age but he "can see he is happier since coming here." Two parents indicated that "having a break from bullying" and finding a school with higher academic expectations factored into their decision. One parent said, "At her former school there is no academic expectation. She dreams of being a writer and that never would have happened if she had stayed there." Thus,

while there may have been some initial trepidation over choosing an online school, parents discovered their students were doing better. About one fifth of survey respondents indicated that parents were the sole decision makers.

Nine parents indicated the student chose to attend the school. One attended because an older sibling had been a former student and another student had attended for a couple of years, then returned to her previous school. Her parent shared, “That was a mistake to have her leave for 10th grade as it put her a couple of courses behind for graduation, but she wouldn’t have appreciated MHA for all that it offers otherwise.” Students were the drivers of the decision-making process about thirty percent of the time.

Seven parents indicated that attending the school was a joint decision between the student and the parent. One parent said, “I chose with him. We felt great about it.” Another said, “We told him about MHA and let him make the choice.” Those who decided together seemed to feel good about the decision-making process. About a quarter of survey respondents jointly made the decision to attend the school.

Overall parents indicated their student wanted to attend and they supported that choice, although some parents made the decision themselves. Additionally, some of the families made the decision together.

“Fit” of previous school. Out of the 27 responses, 20 parents strongly agreed while four parents agreed that their previous school was not a good fit. Three parents disagreed and none of the parents strongly disagreed. In response to the short answer question of choosing to attend Mountain Heights because the previous school was not a good fit, there was a wide variety of answers including (a) learning environment, (b) student experience, (c) parent experience, (d) health, and (e) academics and accommodations.

Six parents shared concerns about the learning environment of the previous school, due to school readiness issues, the number of students, and student safety. One parent indicated that while the junior high setting was manageable "high school would not have been" and another parent mentioned that "there were too many kids and not enough help." Thus, several parents indicated their previous school was not a good fit and they were seeking a different location in which to have their student learn.

Twenty-three parents mentioned their student's experiences at their previous school, particularly interacting with others in a negative way. Eleven experienced bullying by other students and also staff. One parent indicated their student "had been physically assaulted at school several times," and another shared that their student was sexually assaulted by another student. Another parent shared that "the resource teachers were unkind" to her daughter and mentioned that "any bullying she received was mostly from the resource teachers and other teachers." One parent shared that her son "suffered many years of bullying" and another parent said her daughter was "bullied and beat up. She was not protected by the staff." One mother said that her son was "bullied, lost trust in the staff and was unhappy," while another simply said, "Bullying!" Thus, there is some discontent with previous educational settings that prompted parents to consider a different educational option for school for their students. Eight parents said that unsupportive teachers, staff, and administrators factored into their previous school not being a good fit. The responses included phrases such as lack of support, lack of staff support, lack of responsiveness, and lack of clarity. One parent said her son would try to set up meetings after school and "the teachers would not show up." Another indicated that the school was "chaotic and disorganized" with teachers who "left mid-semester "and administrators and teachers who were

"unclear on their roles and responsibilities." Thus, frustrated parents looked for a different setting for their students as a result.

Seven parents indicated the previous school was not a good fit because of their own interactions and experiences with the school. One parent who tried to discuss problems stated that "the administration seemed to only care about their image and shut down the concerns I brought up," and another parent stated that her son was not able to keep up with the workload and "the teachers were angry with me." Another mentioned that she was upset with "how the school dealt or didn't deal with" a particular bullying incident. Thus, several parents said their previous school was not a good fit due to their personal experience.

Six parents shared that their previous school was not a good fit due to student health concerns. One parent said her student was often sick because of his disability. Another parent indicated that "this was a better option due to health and other circumstances." One mother shared, "Our fun-loving son had a mental breakdown from the stress, and he needed something different. He was sick every day in anticipation of school." So, parents considered student health in determining whether their previous school was or was not a good fit.

Eight parents said that academics, including accommodations, was one of the reasons their previous school was not a good fit. Two parents mentioned accommodations specifically. One parent said, "As a student with disabilities he was not getting the help he needed," and another parent indicated that her student had "special needs that the other school could not accommodate." Other parents highlighted the lack of academic assistance. One parent shared, "They did not help her with her academics . . . they just failed her." Another parent said that her child received "a cookie-cutter SPED experience…which meant that academics, even at a basic

level were not being met." Thus, multiple parents chose to look elsewhere for their students' education because their academic needs were not being met.

Overall, parents indicated that their previous school was not a good fit because of the (a) learning environment, (b) student experience, (c) parent experience, (d) health, and (e) academics and accommodations.

Availability of laptop. Out of the 27 responses, three parents strongly agreed while seven parents agreed that they chose Mountain Heights because students received a laptop to use. Twelve parents disagreed and five of the parents strongly disagreed. Out of the short answer responses, there were three categories: (a) positive, (b) neutral, and (c) negative.

Eleven parents indicated they felt that having a laptop was a positive factor in deciding to come to the school. One parent said it was "a great benefit," while another shared "it made it possible for my student to do her work at home. We didn't have a computer for her to use." Another parent stated, "it really prepared my son for the real world," potentially considering the technology-heavy setting his son will be in after graduation and appreciating the typing skills and ability to navigate the online world he will have as a result of being at this online school. Thus, multiple parents held a positive view of having a laptop at the school.

Fifteen parents included neutral comments. Three parents said they had their own laptops for their students to use so the school providing laptops wasn't a factor in the decision to attend. One parent indicated that "it was a nice gesture but not needed." Another parent said that they didn't know about the laptops ahead of time, so it did not influence the decision to attend. Receiving a laptop from Mountain Heights was not a factor in the decision to attend for about half the respondents.

One parent said that his student prefers his own personal desktop instead of the school laptop because “the new laptops are super small, feel/look cheap, and my student is disappointed and doesn’t plan on using it.” Thus, one parent seemed disappointed in the type of laptop provided by the school.

Overall parents either felt positive or neutral about the laptops at the school while one parent had a negative response.

Summary. In summary, the majority of parent survey responses across all the questions asked were categorized into two main themes of (1) learning environment with sub-themes of (a) when; b) where; c) how; and (d) self-determination, and (2) student experience, with sub-themes of (a) bullying, (b) teacher, (c) academics, (d) disability/accommodations, (e) health, and (f) lack of support. There were 107 answers that included a portion of the learning environment theme and 124 answers that contained part of the student experience theme as outlined in Table 15.

Table 15

Overall Themes from Parent Survey Responses

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Number of Responses
Learning Environment	When (Schedule/Flexibility)	19
	Where (Location)	36
	How (Online)	38
	Self-determination	17
	Total	107
Student Experience	Bullying	23
	Teacher	19
	Academics	21
	Disability/Accommodations	22
	Health	21
	Lack of Support	18
	Total	124

This reveals that parents appreciate determining when, where, and how their students learn and that they care deeply about the experience their student is having in school. Parents are concerned about their students' well-being above all else, and if they feel that their needs are not being met physically or academically, they may be prompted to look elsewhere for a different educational experience.

Student Surveys

The student survey responses indicate that the two most important reasons students selected the school were flexibility and that their previous school was not a good fit, as illustrated in the table below. The next most important reason was the teachers, and the least

important reason that students were interested in the school was in order to receive a laptop, as illustrated in Table 16.

Table 16

Student Survey Responses

Question	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. Flexibility	50%	37%	10%	3%
2. Online	30%	60%	7%	3%
3. Teachers	47%	43%	3%	7%
4. Class Lessons	20%	60%	10%	10%
5. Parents as Decision-makers	13%	23%	33%	31%
6. Previous School was not a good fit	50%	37%	7%	6%
7. Laptop	13%	23%	37%	27%

Examining the student surveys alone, the significant correlations were fewer in number than they were for the parent surveys. The most prominent correlation was between questions 3 ("I chose to come to the school because of the teachers") and 4 ("I chose to come to the school because of the class lessons"), $r(28) = .46$, $p = .006$. Once again, this indicates a strong preference for the teachers and their ability to adapt the OER content to meet student needs.

Individual reasons for attending. The first survey question was an open-ended question about the main reason that students decided to attend the school. Most answers contained a variety of reasons for considering a different school. Three main themes emerged from the student responses including: (a) learning environment, (b) student experience, and (c) parent experience.

Learning environment. *Twenty*-eight student responses indicated that a change in learning environment was a main factor in looking for a different educational setting. Sub-themes included: (a) when, meaning the flexibility or the schedule of when the student was learning, (b) where the learning was taking place, and (c) how the instruction was delivered to the student online.

Four students mentioned the timing of when they did their schoolwork, with three students specifically mentioning having "more time" in general. Another student indicated that he was a night owl and appreciated being able to complete his coursework in the evenings. Thus, students chose Mountain Heights in part because of when they could do school.

Six responses discussed changing the learning environment in terms of level of comfort, location, fewer distractions, and attendance issues. For example, one student shared that he was more comfortable doing school online. Another student stated, "I can't be trusted to be in a school because I would ditch a lot." One student said he needed fewer distractions, while another said, "I was having a hard time at the school building and online was a lot easier for me." Finally, one student said, "I can do it anywhere." Thus, the location appeared to be an important consideration in choosing the school.

One of the benefits of online learning is that students can determine how they do school. That element was mentioned eight times with one student saying, "I have more time to think." Three students expressed that the school "was the best option for me." Five students included comments about the flexibility to go at their own pace and one mentioned being able to work in his pajamas. Two students said they just wanted a change or to try something new. Therefore, students appreciated being able to choose how they learned.

The main reason students chose to attend Mountain Heights was the learning environment, which had sub-themes of (a) when students learn, (b) where students learn, and (c) how students learn. Students like being able to decide for themselves when, where, and how to go to school.

Student experience. Twenty-two responses were categorized as having something to do with the student experience, with sub-themes of (a) bullying, (b) teachers, (c) academics, (d) disability/health, and (e) parental influence.

Five students indicated they had issues with being bullied and were looking for a way to stop dealing with bullies. The comments were very similar in nature. One student said, "I got bullied a lot." Another student said, "Kids were not kind to me," while one student said that "a bully picked on me for no real reason." Another student said that he chose to come to the school "to stop dealing with bullies," while one simply shared, "no bullying." Thus, multiple students indicated they chose the school to get away from negative interactions with others and to not be bullied while at school.

Four students referenced teachers as a reason for looking at the school. One student said, "the special ed department at my previous school was bad." Another student said they were looking for great teachers at Mountain Heights, and two students shared that they were specifically interested in getting more teacher help. Students seemed to be looking for additional assistance from teachers and that prompted them to consider alternative educational options.

Five students mentioned academic pieces of the education experience as motivating factors for selecting the school. One student shared that they "didn't like endless homework" while another said he had a hard time keeping his grades up. Another student indicated that "homeschooling was easier" but didn't give a reason as to why. Two students referenced the

school's academic reputation saying, "it is a good option" and "a great school." Therefore, several students highlighted a desire for a different academic experience as the reason for choosing a different school.

Three students had specific disability-related or health issues such as cerebral palsy, anxiety, and recovery post-surgery that prompted them to consider an online option. One student shared, "Anxiety and health issues made going to school difficult and I needed a school that could follow me home when I was recovering." Another said that learning at home helped her hips from being sore due to surgery. Thus, being able to provide for a variety of disability-related or health concerns while continuing their education was a factor in choosing this school.

Parent or family influence. Four responses included some sort of parent or family influence in the decision to attend the school. One student said that his mother didn't like brick-and-mortar middle schools and as a result they decided to look for different options. Another student shared that he and his mother "looked into it together" while one student indicated that his mom heard about the school from friends and they decided to try it. One female student mentioned that her older brother had attended previously and it had worked for him so she was hoping it would also work for her. Thus, four students indicated that a parent or family member was involved in their decision to come to the school.

The main reasons students chose to attend Mountain Heights Academy are: (a) learning environment; (b) student experience; and (c) parent influence. For learning environment, students were looking for a different location and the benefits of an online setting such as flexibility and portability. They also wanted a better learning experience that included: (a) no bullying; (b) more time with teachers; (c) better academics; (d) greater access to teachers; and (e)

the ability to work around disability or health concerns; and (f) several mentioned parental influence as main reasons for looking elsewhere.

The next set of questions asked the student to rate potential reasons for choosing the school on a scale that included *strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree* for the following items: (a) flexibility, (b) online learning, (c) teacher availability, (d) class lessons, (e) students as decision-makers, (f) their previous school not being a good fit, and (g) receiving a student laptop to use.

Flexibility. Fifteen students strongly agreed and eleven agreed that flexibility was one of the reasons they chose to attend Mountain Heights. Three students disagreed and one student strongly disagreed with flexibility as a reason for choosing Mountain Heights.

Twenty-three students, the overwhelming majority of respondents, indicated that flexibility in their schedule was one of the considerations for choosing to attend the school. The responses can be categorized into two main themes: (a) learning environment; and (b) student experience.

The first main theme has three sub-themes: (a) when the student learning takes place; (b) where the student learning takes place, and c) how the student is learning, meaning online.

Six students focused on being able to set their own schedules and work at their own pace. For example, one student said, “I love the ability to get it done early.” Another student said he doesn’t have time to go to school during the day because he works, and two students commented on the flexible nature of school online as their motivation for attending. Therefore, students being able to choose when they do their schoolwork was a motivating factor in selecting the school.

Ten students identified the nature of where they did their work as one of the reasons they chose to come to the school. Comments included references to reduced distractions both from other students and the space itself. One student observed, “I don’t have to stay in a classroom all day.” Two students highlighted other students as detractors to learning. One student stated, “I won’t get distracted by other students goofing off,” while a male student shared, “I don’t have to deal with other students distracting me.” Two others mentioned a less distracting environment in general, and another shared, “It’s quiet around me.” Two students recognized an increased ability to stay focused, with one student commenting, “I am able to concentrate on my schoolwork.” Another two students identified portability as the element of online learning that they enjoyed the most. One student commented, “I can take it with me,” and the other student shared, “I am able to go other places and bring my computer with me.” Lastly, one student shared his appreciation for the content, “You also have the many resources they give you for making learning online more reliable for me.” Lastly, a female student confided that she likes working without “the anxiety of being around other people face to face.” Thus, students appreciated the compact nature of online learning and that there were no ancillary materials that could get lost, in addition to learning computer skills and being able to learn anywhere. As a result, students not only enjoyed being able to do their work in a setting familiar to them, which allows for fewer distractions, and a heightened ability to focus, but they also enjoyed the portability of the laptop and being able to learn anywhere.

Twenty-six students included a benefit of online learning as one of the reasons that flexibility motivated them to choose the school. Six students highlighted their perception that online was easier for them but did not indicate why. Each of the comments were similar in nature and included the same concept of the ease of learning online. For example, one student said, “It

is easier on me," while another said, "Learning online is easier." There were multiple variations of the same theme for the other students as well, with one final student stating, "Online learning works for me because it is much easier." So, students perceived that doing their schoolwork online was easier for them, thus motivating them to select the school. Seven of the twenty-six students specifically identified the technology piece of online learning as part of the flexibility associated with Mountain Heights Academy. One student liked not having "physical books and pages and things" and two students specifically liked not being able to lose things, in reference to homework assignments. Two additional students said, it "teaches me how to use the computer," and "I chose to come because I have a computer." Therefore, students appreciated the digital nature of the learning environment, that they couldn't lose assignments, that they were able to keep track of all of their assignments easily.

The second main theme is the student experience with sub-themes of (a) teacher, and (b) disabilities. Three students mentioned the flexibility of having teacher assistance as one of the reasons for selecting this school. One student stated, "The teachers will help you," and the other student indicated that her teachers were "always there to help" her. Lastly, a student mentioned that, "My teachers can work with my schedule." Thus, students shared that teachers having enough flexibility or time to work with them was an important factor in deciding to attend the school.

Three students mentioned flexibility in regard to their disability or health as a reason they chose to come to the school. One student indicated having the school work around his IEP as one of the reasons and said he can work even when he is "sick or sore." Two students specifically identified sleep issues as areas that had improved as a result of the flexibility afforded them at the school. They did not have to get up early and could function better as a result of getting better

sleep. Thus, having the flexibility to work around their individual disabilities was one of the reasons they chose to attend the school.

Online learning. In response to the question of whether online learning works or not, nine students strongly agreed and 18 agreed that it worked for them. Two students disagreed and one student strongly disagreed that online learning worked for them. The responses to whether online learning worked for the students can be categorized into two main themes: (a) learning environment and (b) student experience.

Thirty responses included comments about the learning environment and indicated that the online setting worked for them because of the following sub-themes: (a) when; (b) where; and (c) how.

Six responses referenced online school working better with their schedule. One student said, “I love the ability to get it done early,” while another student mentioned having a job during traditional school hours and appreciating the flexibility of doing the work after typical school hours. Therefore, students like being able to do school on their own schedule.

Thirty responses included something about where the students were able to do their schoolwork as one of the reasons online learning worked for them. Several students cited fewer distractions with comments such as, “I don’t have to deal with other students distracting me,” and “I won’t get distracted by other students goofing off.” Another student shared, “I’m able to work in a space that is less distracting,” while one simply said, “I can stay focused,” and another stated, “It’s quiet around me.” Other students mentioned not having to stay in the same classroom every day “because it’s boring.” Two students stated that the portability of the laptop is what makes online learning work for them because they are able to go other places and take

their laptops with them. Thus, students being able to either do their learning at home or wherever else they desire is one of the reasons online learning works for them.

Multiple students indicated that the online learning environment makes learning easier in general, such as working at their own pace. In terms of the technology category, online learning works for some students because it is digital. Students shared that they didn't have to have physical books and pages. Two students mentioned that learning is easier online, and another two students referenced being able to keep better track of their schoolwork online by saying, "I can't lose anything," and "I don't lose things." Two students shared that they learned how to use the computer online and lastly, two students identified not having homework separate from schoolwork as a factor in selecting the school. Therefore, the organizational nature of online learning, meaning that students cannot lose assignments and that they don't have to track paper resources, is one of the reasons that online learning works for them.

The student experience theme included two sub-themes (a) teacher, and (b) disability/accommodations.

Two students indicated that they received more help from their teachers online than they did in their previous educational settings. One student mentioned teacher assistance and said, "Online learning works for me because I get more help." Another student contrasted it with her previous experience: "When you're learning in a public-school setting, it's frustrating to not know exactly what the teachers talking about. At MHA, you get to contact your teacher if you need help." Thus, students seemed to appreciate teacher accessibility in the online setting.

One student shared that learning online was better than "having to face other students due to anxiety." As a result, having the ability to learn somewhere other than a brick-and-mortar was her preference.

Teacher availability. In response to the question of describing their experience with teacher availability as a reason for attending, 14 students strongly agreed, and 13 students agreed that teachers are available at the school. Additionally, one student disagreed and two students strongly disagreed that teachers are available.

The short answer responses to this question can be categorized into three themes: (a) frequency of availability, (b) responsiveness, and (c) helpfulness.

There were 16 students who commented on the frequency of teacher availability, using phrases like *often, almost always, almost instantly, during office hours, within 24 hours, usually always, and available.* Nine students indicated teachers were "always available." One student shared that they "sometimes struggled with getting a hold of a teacher but it's better than public school." Thus, the majority of students felt like their teachers were available to help them.

Four students commented on the responsiveness of teachers. Three students offered positive responses. One student said that "they often reply quickly," while another shared that they, "answer almost instantly." Another student stated that his teachers, "always get back to me," while one student shared that sometimes they had problems "not hearing back from my emails or messages." Therefore, most students felt like their teachers were responsive while one did not.

Twelve students included elements of helpfulness in their responses, with comments like, "When I need help, I can get in contact and get it." Another student shared that, "They feel like a friend who helps," while another student said, "They always help me on exactly what I needed at the moment." Thus, students perceived that teachers were readily available to help them.

The majority of the students felt like the teachers cared about and were interested in them personally. Three students sometimes had problems with teacher responsiveness but said that teacher interaction was better than where they were previously.

Curriculum. Six students strongly agreed and 18 agreed that the curriculum was one of the reasons for coming to the school. Three students disagreed and three strongly disagreed.

In describing their experience with the curriculum, the short answer responses were varied; however, they can be grouped into four main themes: (a) student preference about the class lessons, (b) student perception about what they learn, including the type of lesson they prefer, (c) teachers, and (d) courses and access.

Twenty-five students responded with some sort of indication of their level of preference for their class lessons. Ten students used words that indicated a strong preference for them, such as “love,” “awesome,” “very easy,” “very good content,” and “great.” One student identified making friends as a reason, saying, “Awesome because you get to make friends and get your work done at the same time.” Two students appreciated the design of the courses. One student shared that they were “planned well,” while another said she liked “the way they are structured.” One student mentioned being motivated by the lessons stating, “They keep my interest and make me want to do the work.” Five students indicated their level of preference was good, that they liked the lessons, that they were fun, or that they were easy. Four students used descriptive words like “okay” and “pretty helpful.” One of those students said they would have to review, and another indicated that the class lessons were “more understandable.” Six student responses included the extremes on either end. For example, one student said they were “great or horrid,” while another said, “some are hard and some aren’t.” Other responses included verbiage like “challenging” and “not challenging” and “confusing” and “not confusing.” Therefore, the

majority of the students seemed to respond favorably to the curriculum while some found them variable depending on the class.

Four student responses included elements of what they learned or preferences about the types of lessons that appealed to them. For example, one student said they learned “what is needed” while another said the school had students “learn a lot.” One student preferred lessons that are visual and easy to understand, while another loved “the ones with video chat.” Therefore, the instructional design component of the course lessons was a consideration for some students. They wanted to be able to learn and understand in a way that worked for them.

Three students indicated that their experience with the class lessons was related to the teacher. One student said that the “teaching is exemplary” while another said the classes are “easy to attend because the teachers are always available to help.” One student indicated that “some of the teachers are frustrating while others aren’t.” Students seemed to link their course experiences to the teachers and the responses varied significantly between exemplary and frustrating based on their interaction with their teacher.

Two students shared that their experience with the course lessons focused on the variety of classes and the convenience of being able to access them anytime. One student articulated that there is a “great variety of classes,” while another said that they are “very convenient and I can see them whenever I want.” Students seemed to appreciate the number of courses offered and the access they have to them.

The responses for this question varied, but overall students seemed to have a positive perception of the curriculum, although some students were ambivalent and some were frustrated. Some students linked the curriculum to their learning preferences and teachers and based their responses on that, while two students appreciated the number of courses offered to them.

Parents as decision-makers. Four students strongly agreed and seven agreed that their parents made the decision for them to attend the school. Ten students disagreed and nine strongly disagreed.

In the short answer section, there were very clear categories of (a) students as decision makers; (b) parents as decision-makers with students supporting; (c) joint decision making; (d) parents as decision-makers with unknown student support; and (e) parents as decision makers with lack of student support.

Seven students indicated that they made the decision to come to Mountain Heights and that they were excited to try it. One student mentioned that she wanted to come because it is easy for her and "better than going to a building." Another had a sibling attend and it worked for her so she wanted to try it too. Lastly, one student articulated, "I wanted to go to this school. My parents aren't making me do it." Thus, out of the eighteen students who answered the short answer question, seven of them, or just over a third shared that they were excited about attending the school and that their parents were not the ones who made the decision for them to attend.

Joint decision making. Two students explained the process of deciding together as a family or as a parent and child. For example, one student said, "My mom didn't make me go. We talked it out together and we both decided it would be better that I attended Mountain Heights Academy." Another student shared, "It was a family decision we all agreed on" indicating that she had a say in the process of determining where she would be going to school. Thus, two out of the 18 respondents indicated that they were involved as joint partners in the decision-making process.

Parents as decision makers with students supporting. Six students shared that while their parent made the initial decision, the student supported it even if they did not realize it until

after the fact. For example, one student shared, “I actually didn’t know where I was going to school until my mom told me. But I realize now it was the right choice.” Another student said he “felt great” while another said he “felt good” when they found out from their parents that they would be attending the school. Lastly, upon hearing that she would be attending the school, one student shared, “I already thought it was a good school ahead of time.” So, one-third of those who shared their thoughts via the short answer responses indicated that although their parent made the decision, they supported that choice after the fact.

Parents as decision-makers with unknown student support. One student shared that their parents thought it would be better for him because he got help; however, he gave no indication of how he felt about the decision himself.

Parents as decision makers without student support. Lastly, two students did not support the decision their parents made to have them attend the school. One did not mind the classes, but he missed his friends at his previous school. The other student missed taking classes at “a normal high school.” Thus, two of the eighteen students who responded to the short answer question disagreed with their parents’ decision to send them to the school based on access to friends and taking classes in a traditional setting.

The answers to this question were split between five different categories. Fifteen students supported attending whether they were involved in the decision-making process or not, while one student indicated his parents made the decision without sharing how he felt. Two students did not support their parents deciding to send them to the school.

“Fit” of previous school. Fifteen students strongly agreed that their previous school was not a good fit while eleven agreed. Two students disagreed and two strongly disagreed that their previous school was not a good fit.

The reasons for their previous school not being a good fit included two main themes: (a) learning environment and (b) student experience.

Learning environment. The learning environment theme includes sub-themes of (a) where the students do their schoolwork and (b) how the students do their schoolwork. Ten students made comments about the learning environment in terms of their previous school not being a good fit.

Five students included comments about the physical attributes of their previous school as reasons for it not being a good fit. Examples included being "a bad school," "having bad air conditioning," "it was loud," and "I did not like their way of learning." Another student skipped school often and lacked motivation to attend. Thus, learning in that particular location was not a good fit.

Five students indicated that the non-digital delivery of their previous school was part of what contributed to their school not being a good fit. For example, one student explained, "My previous school wasn't bad, but I had to worry about homework which would stress me out." Another student said that the workload was becoming a problem and one student said that she could not go ahead on her work as the reason the previous school was not a good fit. Another student said the website layout was confusing while another shared that she was not learning well in that particular environment. So, multiple students called attention to the workload and other characteristics of a traditional setting that caused their previous setting to not be a good fit.

Student experience. Fourteen students cite various areas of their personal experiences as reasons why their previous school was not a good fit, including the following sub-themes: (a) bullying; (b) teachers; (c) academics; and (d) disability/accommodations.

Bullying. Five students mentioned that poor interactions with other students made their previous school a poor fit. One student shared that other students would rip and steal his assignments. Another student simply stated that bullying was the reason his previous school was not a good fit. Other students shared similar comments, such as, "the girls there were mean," or "the kids were not very kind." One student stated that "it wasn't really the school [that prompted him to leave], it was just the kids there." Thus, multiple students identified not being treated well by other students as a reason for their previous school not being a good fit.

Teachers. Two students said that teachers were the reason their previous school was not a good fit. One student said her teacher was mean and did not understand her while another said the teacher would not help him. Therefore, two students identified poor interaction with teachers as the reason their previous school was not a good fit.

Academics. Another said, "I didn't understand it and it didn't keep my interest." One student shared, "They were not understanding," while another said, "I wasn't getting that much help." Another student said his previous school was not a good fit because they "didn't give fair treatment to all students and didn't give a great education." Lastly, one student struggled with the level of difficulty and found the school to be easier. Thus, multiple students said their academic needs were not being met by their previous school and that's why it was not a good fit.

Disability/accommodations. Five students included comments about their disability or accommodations not being met. One student stated, "my special education needs were not met" and another said, "they were not willing to help me with my learning disabilities." One student with cerebral palsy said it was difficult to walk everywhere and another student shared that teachers did not let her go to the bathroom despite her health condition. And, one student's anxiety and depression made attending school on a daily basis difficult. Thus, several students

had a disability which warranted an accommodation they felt was not being met, which led to their previous school not being a good fit.

Two students indicated that their attitude toward their previous school was “okay” or “fine” without offering further explanation. Lastly, one student stated their previous school just was not a good fit.

Availability of laptop. Four students strongly agreed and seven students agreed that having a laptop at the school was one of the reasons they decided to attend. Eleven students disagreed and eight students strongly disagreed that having a laptop influenced their decision to attend.

Four categories emerged from the short answer questions in how the students felt about having a laptop at the school: (a) student has a school laptop and really likes it; (b) student has a school laptop and is okay with it; (c) student has a school laptop and does not like it; and (d) student does not have a school laptop.

Fourteen students have a school laptop and seem to really like it based on the responses. Three of those students commented on the portability and being able to move from room to room, or to take it on vacation. Two students highlighted the convenience of having a laptop, although one mentioned the slight inconvenience of losing the charging cord. Four students indicated it was easy to use while five students applied the adjectives good, great, nice, and awesome. One student highlighted the benefit of not being distracted by her personal computer use because of the separate student laptop, and another mentioned his family of gamers which would have made using one of their computers difficult. He was glad he had his own school laptop. Thus, almost half of the students who responded have a laptop and like having it.

Seven students have a school laptop and are okay with it. Two students said they liked the laptop while two said it was “okay” and one said she was “fine” with having a laptop. One student said she felt great about the laptop, but it was not why she attended the school. Another student thought it was nice for those who could not afford their own laptops. And finally, one student uses her iPad more than her school laptop. Therefore, seven students are ambivalent about the laptop, or it was not why they chose to attend the school.

Two students used the school laptops but did not like them. One said he wished he could use his own laptop so his games would not be blocked and the other one said he would rather be outside with no electronics. Thus, two students who use the laptops do not like them.

Seven students indicated they had their own personal laptops and elected not to use the laptops that the school offered.

Out of those who do use a school laptop, the majority liked using it; however, it is not a significant factor for them attending the school.

Summary. In summary, the majority of student survey responses across all the questions asked were categorized into two main themes of (1) learning environment: with sub-themes of (a) when; (b) where; and (c) how; and (2) student experience: with sub-themes of (a) bullying; (b) teacher; (c) academics; (d) disability/accommodations; and (e) health. Ninety-eight answers included a portion of the learning environment theme and 52 answers contained part of the student experience theme as outlined in Table 17 below.

Table 17

Overall Themes from Student Survey Responses

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Number of Responses
Learning Environment	When (Schedule/Flexibility)	26
	Where (Location)	29
	How (Online)	41
	Total	98
Student Experience	Bullying	10
	Teacher	13
	Academics	12
	Disability/Accommodations	7
	Health	10
	Total	52

Survey Synthesis

The parent and student surveys emerged with the same overarching themes, (a) learning environment, and (b) student experience. However, there were two distinct differences in the sub-themes depending on the sample group. The parent surveys included an additional sub-theme in each category. In the learning environment theme the parent surveys included an additional sub-theme of self-determination, while the student survey did not warrant enough responses to include that category as a sub-theme. And, for the student experience theme, all sub-themes were the same except for the addition of lack of support as a sub-theme in the parent surveys.

Parents responded 36 times with sub-themes that included elements of where the students were learning, while student responses included those same items 29 times suggesting the

parents valued the location of the learning slightly more than the students. Both parents and students valued the online nature of the learning environment about equally with parents including 41 response elements and students including 38 response phrases about the digital nature of their learning environment.

Both surveys shared the sub-themes of (a) when - flexibility, (b) where - location, and (c) how - online. Of note, 17 parent and 26 student responses included elements of when the learning took place, suggesting that students valued the schedule and flexibility slightly more than the parents did.

Both surveys also shared the same sub-themes of (a) bullying, (b) teacher, (c) academics, (d) disability/accommodations, and (e) health. In all five sub-themes, parent responses made more mention of each sub-theme than the student responses despite the sample size being almost identical. For example, 23 parents and ten students mentioned bullying, and 19 parents and 13 students brought up teachers as reasons for looking for new learning environments. Additionally, 21 parents talked about academics while only twelve students included it in their responses. Of note, 22 parents mentioned their student's disability or accommodation while only seven of the students included it, which was the biggest disparity between the answers in the student experience theme. Additionally, 21 parents and ten students talked about student health issues in the health sub-theme. Thus, parents appeared to place more value on these categories.

Sixteen responses indicated that parents were looking for more of a voice in their student's education or that they wanted their students to have more of a say in their learning environment. Several of the comments also expressed frustration with their prior school setting and a desire to "try something new." Only two student comments indicated they were looking for something new or wanting a say in their education. As a result, parents seemed to be looking for

a way to take control of the learning environment of their students so they would have more input, while the students did not report this with as much frequency.

Eighteen parents mentioned some sort of loss of trust in the school staff as a reason for looking for a different school option for their student, while none of the students made survey statements that fell into this sub-theme. The parent responses fell into two distinct and equal categories of the school staff not responding appropriately to (a) parents' concerns about their students being bullied and (b) parents' concerns about their students' IEP and accommodations. Parents used phrases like, "nothing was done," "did not care about," "lost faith in," "was not helping to protect," "not getting the help," and "not willing to work with her" to communicate how they felt about the lack of support from their previous school experience. The lack of support from school staff seemed to be a catalyst for finding a different school setting. The combination of parents not feeling supported coupled with not feeling like they had a voice seemed to motivate them to look for a different learning environment for their student.

Overall, the learning environment sub-themes evoked 205 response elements indicating that when, where, and how students were learning were important to both parties. Parents also mentioned one of the student experience sub-themes 124 times, while students only discussed those same sub-themes 52 times. Therefore, the learning environment theme seemed to be a highly important factor to both students and parents while the student experience seemed to be more of a catalyst for change for the parents, as portrayed in Table 18 below.

Table 18

Overall Themes from Parent and Student Survey Responses

Main Themes	Sub-themes	Number of Parent Responses	Number of Student Responses	Total Number of Responses
Learning Environment	When (Schedule/Flexibility)	17	26	43
	Where (Location)	36	29	65
	How (Online)	38	41	79
	Self-determination	16	*2	18
	Total	107	98	205
Student Experience	Bullying	23	10	33
	Teacher	19	13	32
	Academics	21	12	33
	Disability/Accommodations	22	7	29
	Health	21	10	31
	Lack of Support	18	[a]0	18
	Total	124	52	176

[a]Not included in the themes for the student survey analysis due to low numbers.

The short answer analysis is supported by the statistical analysis. Interestingly, the student-parent combined data had more (nine) statistically significant ($p < .05$) correlations than the two separate groups.

The strongest student-parent correlations were between questions 3 (“I chose to attend the school because teachers are available to help me”) and 4 (“I chose to attend because of the class

lessons"), $r(57) = .42$, $p < .000$. Both parents and students were looking for more teacher help and curriculum that could be modified to meet their student's needs, so this was a logical correlation.

Question 1 ("I chose to attend because of the flexible schedule") and 3 ("I chose to attend the school because teachers are available to help me") were also correlated, $r(57) = .36$, $p = .003$. Once again, teacher availability and a flexible schedule to do school on their own time was an appealing idea for many families and two of the main reasons they chose to come to the school.

Interviews

After conducting, transcribing, and coding the interviews, I chose to focus on four main themes: (a) self-determination—defined as having a voice in the educational options for the parent and the student as a result of negative prior experiences, particularly bullying for students and lack of support for parents; (b) mattering and empowerment—defined as feeling like the students and parents matter to the staff and particularly the teachers at the school; (c) the combination of teachers with the capacity to personalize the content to meet student needs coupled with an adaptable digital OER curriculum; and (d) social opportunities. I will now explain each of these themes in more detail and provide thick descriptions from the interviews to help readers understand the participants' perspectives.

Self-determination. One emergent theme that unfolded in the interviews as each family shared their educational journey was a determination that their needs were not being met in their previous setting, and sometimes in several prior settings. At some point there was either a specific event or enough general dissatisfaction that led to the search for something different. In most cases, the parents were anticipating potential long-term ramifications of leaving their students in a particular setting while the students were more focused on immediate outcomes.

Also, the students may not have understood or known all of the information the parents had at the time the decision was made to switch schools. For example, the students may not have been aware of parent interactions with the administration or requests for additional assistance from teachers that had gone unanswered.

The Andersons had explored every combination of schooling available, such as homeschooling, district schools, private online schools, and online charter schools. When Allison realized that what had worked for her five sons was not working for her two daughters, she shifted gears. She was specifically looking for a learning environment where her daughter, Ashley, could mature a little more before being in a brick-and-mortar junior high setting. She was concerned that while her daughter looked mature, her cognitive skills did not match, and she wanted a safe place for her daughter to do her schooling.

Ashley seemed more concerned about the teachers and how she was being treated by the other students. She shared, “I heard that the local high school wasn't really great. The teachers weren't very helpful. The kids were kinda mean.” While Allison was worried about the neighborhood school being too much for her daughter, Ashley was specifically concerned about the teachers and the students.

Next, the Brown family was told by a guidance counselor that their 8th grade twins would not graduate from high school. Benjamin shared his concerns about that saying, “Brady and Brinley, our twins, they were struggling through seventh and eighth grade with us and they did their IEPs, they told us that they just wouldn't graduate, they weren't on that track.” As a result, he knew that they needed a different setting, one through which they could graduate.

Brady was interested in changing schools for a very different reason. He shared, “I got bullied a lot with my speech problem and I got teased a lot with my disabilities…so my mom

figured you should look for a new school. And then I wasn't getting a lot of help with my disabilities." His motivations stemmed from being bullied and not getting the help he needed.

Brinley had a very specific health problem that required access to the bathroom consistently and she had been denied access on a regular basis. Additionally, she didn't feel like she was getting the help that she needed. She said, "It was just like the content was harder and they didn't explain it in a way that I could understand."

While both of the Browns' students were not happy about being told they would not graduate, the immediate problems of being bullied and not being allowed to go to the bathroom seemed more pressing to them, while the more long-term problem of not graduating was the catalyst for seeking an alternative option in Benjamin's opinion.

In another case, Cassandra Carter was trying her best to keep fifth grade Cameron caught up every day, but it was taking a toll:

> And it was getting to a point where we were doing three and a half hours of homework a night to keep him caught up, because unfortunately they were pulling him out of his traditional class to put him in resource so that he could get help with the reading and the different things like that. And it was, it got to a point where I was exhausted. I was tired of fighting him. He's been in school all day long for eight hours, and you want me to do three more hours of homework a night?

The family finally decided that being two grade levels behind in reading, along with the time they were spending trying to keep him on track was not acceptable, so they enrolled in the district's program for sixth grade, which was hard at first but got better with time. The online option was not available in seventh grade and neither of them wanted Cameron to attend the local junior high school, so they searched for alternatives. Cassandra and Cameron were driving

in the car and heard an advertisement on the radio which caught their attention. They researched the school when they got home and enrolled in Mountain Heights Academy that same day. Cameron also shared that he was teased and bullied.

> It was just really hard because there was one kid I did not like, everybody hated him. He would always be disruptive, stop class, get up and do things in the middle of a lesson in class and he just was basically the big bully. I would be the one that would be getting bullied.

He told him to stop being a bully in class and when he wouldn't Cameron kicked him but didn't get in trouble. His parents were peripherally aware of the incident mentioned but they may not have recognized the severity or how much the incident had affected him. So, while both Cassandra and Cameron were looking specifically for an online option to reduce the workload and cater to Cameron's specific needs, he was also grateful to not have to be around other students who bullied him.

For the Davis family, Drake was attending an online school that was using curriculum that was not aligned to the assessments. Danielle had a conversation with the guidance counselor who told her it was not the school's job to review all of the content. She disagreed. This was her response:

> And so we were looking for another solution. I didn't know what I was going to do and then I saw an ad for Mountain Heights Academy, and it was like every prayer has been answered. I say that because I knew what he needed. I knew that he needed someone who wasn't me to teach him High School curriculum.

Danielle recognized that she could not be the sole teacher for her son for all high school courses, and she felt like this school could provide that for him. Drake's perspective on why he switched schools was a little less specific.

> The last school wasn't a good fit. It started out okay and it was my own fault that I wasn't doing as well as I could have and then things took a turn for the worst in the second year. In my third year they said we're not homeschooling you anymore you have to come to our place.

The school changed their policy on how students could do their work and required them to attend the school building in a city that was an hour away from the Davis family, which was not something that Drake was excited about doing. Between the loss of flexibility and the curriculum issues, the Davises determined that they would find a different option that was a better fit. Danielle's primary motivation was finding a school that could provide the academic support her son needed, while Drake was searching for a flexible option he could do from home.

In addition to the self-determination of circumstance in changing the school setting, some students also discovered the value of determining their own schedules. Brady said,

> I get to pick what schedule I can do and you can do your own schedule if you want to that works for you. I like that part and then you can go ahead on homework because [brick-and-mortar] school doesn't really let you go ahead on homework. So, you can do that.

Brady's twin sister, Brinley, also liked the option of making her own schedule:

> It's very flexible with your schedule. You can be on time and all the homework is due by Friday so you can make your own schedule with that. And if you miss a lot of school, the school is good for you. So, if you're at home and you're sick you can still go to school. And you can sometimes do it on the road.

Brinley suffered from some specific health problems that caused her to miss quite a bit of school in her previous setting, so she was happy to have the flexibility of still attending from home or while traveling.

Danielle discovered that allowing Drake to exercise self-determination was harder than it sounded but worth the time and effort to allow him to be in charge of his own educational experience.

> It's hard for them [his former brick-and-mortar school teachers] to imagine how a child who's so bright and verbal could be slow. I have trouble getting to the end result and need more time. And so, our first year with Mountain Heights was phenomenal. Not so much for Drake but for me as a parent! It took some adjustment for him. and he didn't do well. Last semester, when everyone stopped rescuing him, he ended up with all Ds and instead of kind of blowing up and getting upset and raising a ruckus we all just, the teachers said (and I took my cue from them as well), "Okay this isn't working so let's let him fall and experience it." I had to let go of the idea that I wanted him to have a scholarship for college and be okay with the outcome and let it be his. And that made all the difference. He picked it up and he said, "You know what I want better for myself. I don't like how this feels." And last term he got all A's. From one term to the next. So that's our MHA story from my perspective. He's just kind of really taken off and he's gained confidence doing, you know, participating in online school that he never could have in a public environment. And so, I told you earlier that I asked him a few days ago if he regretted not going to a regular [brick-and-mortar] school, if he felt like that was a bad decision. And he said, "no, I needed this and I wouldn't have done well without it."

So, Danielle worked in conjunction with the teachers to allow Drake to experience self-determination first hand. He needed to see what he could and could not do on his own with the hope that it would motivate him to be more successful and to take charge of his own learning.

In discussing this specific experience with Drake and attempting to understand what changed between his first year and this last semester it took several minutes of lengthy dialogue and in-depth questioning to discover what he had done differently to determine how to be successful, mainly because articulating his own meta-cognitive processes took time to explore and develop.

> **Drake:** I don't know how to explain it but I don't have to set hours for myself in the day and even then, I get to choose those hours so I'm not forced into it. I don't have to take math. I choose to take math online because it's easier for me. It gets my brain pumping so I can do the rest of my classes. So, I get up, I get my brothers out the door, and then usually I have about half an hour to myself where I take the dog out and I just hang out and spend time with my pets. Sometimes I'll play a little game or record a video and then at 9 I do statistics for an hour. At 10 I do English for an hour. At 11 I do forensics which I would probably switch but even then, it wouldn't make a difference. And then I take a lunch break where I usually take my dog out for another walk or do something small. . . Clean up or something. And then I'll get to either history which is Monday, Wednesday, Friday, or financial literacy Tuesday, Thursday for an hour that tides me over until 2 and then I usually practice ukulele for 10 minutes and get ready to go to my Seminary class at my local high school.

Interviewer: Okay, so aside from your electives on Tuesdays, Thursdays, and Mondays, Wednesdays it really sounds like you have a fairly traditional schedule. Except I'm going to go back to what you said, you chose it.

Drake: Right.

Interviewer: I love that.

Drake: It's not having to be like, "Oh, yeah today I have PE whether I like it or not but I really wish I could go take English right now instead." If I had PE that I could do that. What's worked well is definitely making a schedule and sticking to it instead of letting myself flow and do what feels right in the moment. Like committing to something. If I can't get to statistics at nine then I'll do it after school and I'll make sure it gets done. I'll make sure I get that work done. Even when I'm injured, I'm still doing my best. I got a huge cat bite that was swollen up and was big and painful and I had to take meds for it. It was awful. So, I was like typing one letter at a time instead of my usual 30. So, I was working dramatically down so instead I just worked after school because that's what I had to do.

Interviewer: How did you figure that out?

Drake: Like I don't have very much time because I couldn't because I was so hurt so I just had to do time over.

Drake liked determining his own schedule, but he had also already been told explicitly to do that the first time he started taking classes at the school. I wanted to explore whether he could articulate how he figured it out for himself.

Interviewer: But in general. Because when you come to the orientation we say, “Set a schedule and stick to it.” And invariably kids don't and it's almost like you have to figure it out the hard way. Was that kind of your experience?

Drake: Yeah definitely.

Interviewer: But some students just don't figure it out, so how did you figure it out?

Drake: I don't know. I guess that it helps that I can say, “I need a five-minute break here. So, here's how I look at it. The schedule is a guideline. It's not a strict “you have to do this now and never again if you miss it.” It says you have to take statistics for an hour, so I take statistics for an hour. Whether it's at 9:00 or if it's at 3:00 I do it for an hour. And I try and stick with the schedule but sometimes you have to make adjustments. Sometimes you need a break. So, like just take a five-minute break and then make up that five minutes later. Five minutes isn't going to be super big unless you're on the tail end of a test.

Interviewer: That makes sense.

Drake: Another thing I find is reward yourself if you can get everything done just consistently until lunch then after lunch because you have that whole hour scheduled in there with you, take a break, play a game, watch a TV show…I don't watch YouTube videos in my breaks very much anymore cause I can't see the time and that's frustrating.

Interviewer: Right.

Drake: Sometimes I listen to them while doing other stuff or I just watch them later.

Interviewer: Well I really like how you figured that out Drake, I'm very proud of you because I know that wasn't an easy journey to be on. I'm very proud of where you ended up.

Interviewer: Tell me about your grades because I'm pretty sure last year you didn't have all As.

Drake: No, I did not, I had all Ds and that was sad.

Interviewer: So, sticking to a schedule, being in charge of your own grades, and figuring out how to use it as a loose guideline and you are getting all As?

Drake: Yep!

Interviewer: I am so proud of you!

The combination of Danielle ceding control of Drake's schedule and allowing him to take charge of it himself, even if that meant allowing him to fall short, gave Drake the ability to exercise his agency in determining how to design his school day. He appeared to have developed better time management skills that allowed him to work in blocks of time, and better motivational strategies to reward himself for task completion. Having the ability to choose his schedule and how he learned, allowed him to develop a better set of study habits which seems to have led to greater success with his grades as evidenced by getting straight As this last semester.

In each of the four families, the parent anticipated the long-term effects of staying in the current setting, while the students were more concerned about the immediate consequences of where they were going to school and looking for a change from bullying, poor teaching, and lessons that did not meet their needs as a student with disabilities. The families chose to find a different educational option and once they enrolled at the school, the students were able to implement principles of self-determination individually in determining how, when, and where to learn. Drake's experience with self-determination yielded educational success in terms of grades.

Mattering. One of the strongest themes that emerged from the surveys and the interviews was that of mattering. The parents, who felt that they had not been supported or listened to in

prior settings, not only felt like they were supported and listened to at the school, but they also felt like their child mattered individually to the administrators and teachers. They perceived that their student was visible and that the staff cared deeply about their individual success regardless of their learning differences.

When Brady was asked about how caring is communicated at the school, his answer focused on the social interaction at activities and how students and teachers alike asked about his well-being.

Interviewer: How is caring communicated to you?

Brady: At the parties, people go up to you and say hi and you talk to teachers and they ask how you're doing. They just show that they care about you.

Interviewer: Is it like a couple of specific students or is it everybody or half the students?

Brady: It's sometimes there's a couple? I noticed teachers do it more but when I go to parties with my mom and dad, they talk to them.

So, Brady's perception of caring came from both peers and teachers initiating conversations with him at activities. He also pointed out that his teachers initiated conversations with his parents.

Danielle had some insights into how the distribution of teacher time facilitates mattering for students because they are available throughout the day. The teachers are not teaching classes with rotating groups of students throughout the day, so their time is spent working with students as needed. For Danielle, this translated to stronger communication on her student's status and more timely availability to work with Drake when he needed teacher assistance. Both of those, the communication and the assistance, equated to mattering in her mind. Danielle said,

> Mattering is really individual. So, when I think back to the favorite teachers that I've had, they weren't my favorite because I learned the most from them, but I did, but they were my favorite because they cared about me and loved me and it was genuine, it was real. When Drake starts slipping in one of his classes and his teachers reach out, you know I don't find out three months down the road at a parent conference that he's so far behind but he is never going to catch up. I'm getting emails, he's getting emails and they're saying, "Hey, what's going on, what do you need, how can I support you?" So it's not necessarily that I felt he mattered and other places he didn't, but he just didn't matter as much there. And part of that is just a function of being overwhelmed as a teacher because you have hundreds of students in your classroom. Even at the junior high at [brick-and-mortar junior high school] he had 80 other students that needed that teacher's attention so if you wanted 15 minutes of their time after school you just sit around for 45 minutes and wait for it. This ability to create time during office hours is much more akin to real life. So, when I say that he matters more, I don't know that he matters "more" but he matters absolutely the right amount and he gets the kind of attention that I think every kid should be able to get in school. It's a shame the other schools can't deliver it because they're over-burdened and can't figure out how to make it happen.

Benjamin also equated the teacher attention and assistance with caring about his two children. He mentioned his own learning struggles and his teachers lack of believing in him as a high school student as a reason for how motivated he is to take his children's education seriously. His initial motivation for enrolling his students at the school was because he was told when they were in 8th grade that they would not graduate from high school, so he was immensely relieved when he met with the team at the school and learned that Brady and Brinley

were indeed on track to receive diplomas, provided that they continued to work hard and receive the requisite number of credits each year.

Benjamin: I think for the most part you meet what we needed and you give them a desire to move somewhere, because when they first heard they couldn't graduate that was really heartbreaking for Brin and Brady, and they came in, because the one day I picked them up from that school, they're like, "guess what happened? They told me I'm not going to graduate. What's up with that?" And so, I'm like, "that's not right, I think there's a way that we can get this," and that's why –

Interviewer: And what grade were they in?

Benjamin: That was in eighth grade. It was in eighth grade, a year and a half ago, I guess. A couple years ago. So, with Mountain Heights coming in the picture, you guys, oh yeah, we're going to get these guys going. Awesome! This is going good. You know, I was struggling there for a little bit. Where can I turn to because you want your kids to be successful, you know?

Interviewer: Yeah.

Benjamin: And graduating at least, and so this gave them a bigger picture. Especially Brady. You don't, you hear it a lot at home. This is awesome, I get to graduate, you know? And when he first started ninth grade that's what he said, "it's like now I can graduate." And that put a smile on his face, you know? As simple as it sounds, it was huge for him so … I've been in somewhat that situation with learning challenges so that's why I take a passion for that, I take their education pretty seriously. Because like I said before, I had teachers that didn't believe that I was going to do anything either. So, I get where they're coming from in some ways, it's just not true, they ARE going to accomplish

things, they ARE going to graduate and have a successful life. So, when Mountain Heights gave me that result that the twins could graduate with the tutoring and all the available resources that you have within your realms that provide that for the students and for our kids, and that someone cares out there, that they believe in them, that they can do this, I was like, “This is AWESOME!”

Benjamin further articulated what he meant by the teachers believing in his students, which communicated to him that they mattered by giving specific examples of how they spent their time working with Brady and Brinley. He mentioned the time they take to do test reviews and was quick to mention that they help them learn to how to think, not just give them the answers.

Interviewer: So, something that you keep saying is that the teachers believe in the kids so how do you know that? How do the teachers communicate that to the students that they matter? What does that look like?

Benjamin: Well, they communicate just by their availability, their times they make themselves available, even for parents able to call. For example, Mrs. Moore gave me some good tips as well, but just the availability, just the day to day approach to what they do for the students. I just see them interacting and reaching out every day. Well, when I ask Brady and Brinley at the end of the day, how was your school day? They have classes where the teacher will have a review session before they take a test. I never got that. They help them to achieve what they want and to help them learn but also help them think. They have to think through it. They don't just give them the answers.

So, to Benjamin, mattering was communicated by having the teachers available to help his twins, especially since it did not seem like that was available to him during his high school experience.

Allison also focused on the teacher rapport as the main way to communicate to Ashley that she mattered and was important. Allison came from a homeschooling background and seemed to feel like the bulk of the teaching was largely her responsibility. She felt a sense of gratitude that the teachers continued to try new strategies with Ashley until they achieved success. Allison also shared that the understanding attitudes of the teachers demonstrated that they cared about Ashley and that she mattered to them as an individual. She spent a little time, like Danielle did, contrasting an experience in a prior brick-and-mortar setting with a teacher who had 300 students who did not have the time available, through no fault of his own, to be able to work individually with the students.

> I think just overall the rapport between the teachers and Ashley has been really nice. I mean I talked to you a little about this before, because of all of the other therapeutic things that we have been involved in, I had not been able to honestly supervise the school work as much as I would like, early and all. I have been so grateful for the teachers that have been understanding, energetic, cheerful. When one thing doesn't work, they try another. Just really understanding I never felt like anybody was thinking, “Oh my goodness, can you help her with this?”
>
> Because all along I've been a teacher myself. I know how busy they must be and how much they would probably appreciate a little more of my involvement at home but we just had some real upheavals the last couple of years, and we had to devote a lot of time to therapy, to medications, to legal concerns, medical, just the whole ball of wax. I think that's been more than just a single event, that has been the best thing, the most positive thing for me as a parent and I think Ashley as a student, just the teachers and their attitude that made us feel that we truly mattered. I've been grateful that we could find a

> way for Ashley, especially to keep going forward. I never felt like Ashley hit a wall and there was nowhere for her to go, there was no way she could keep moving forward, that that was just it. I've never felt that.
>
> I've always felt like there were people there who were really interested in helping her succeed and finding a way to make it work. I know with Ashley when she was in middle school, she was having real difficulties. In one of her classes, I spoke to the teacher. Bless his heart. He probably had 300 students. His method was to encourage the students to if they needed help, they didn't understand something, ask a peer. Go ask a peer for help. Ashley tried that and she either couldn't find anybody who wanted to help her, and she just didn't find help that way. Weeks would go by with her not understanding what was going on, not getting the help she needed. So anyway, I've just been very grateful at how the teachers just hang in there in this type of setup. They help keep them moving forward.

Allison had a particular frame of reference to contrast her current experience with and identified teacher time spent with Ashley as one way to communicate that she mattered to her teachers.

Cassandra reminisced on her favorite experience at the school over the three and a half years she and Cameron have been involved. She described the end of year awards gala where each teacher selects a couple of students to recognize. He was given two awards for being the Top Student in his Directed Studies class and in another one of his classes. She was not aware of the process the school goes through on an annual basis to determine which students to select, whether to mail awards to the students who cannot attend in person, and whether it is worth it in terms of value to the administrative team to create the award certificates for two hundred students each year. Additionally, the element of a teacher noticing Cameron’s hard work and

recognizing him with an unsolicited award was a highly motivating event that shaped Cameron's self-confidence and desire to succeed for the next several years.

> **Cassandra:** I think…. So, the end of year awards. I think, has been the most fun. Well, for Cameron for one, but for me to see the interactions between, honestly, the other teachers and just the amount of effort that goes into making sure that the students know that they are appreciated. The first couple of years that we were here he got some awards, and he had no idea, no idea he was getting them but they still hang on his wall, the awards he was given those first two years. They hang on his wall, and he knows that who he is matters, because, he didn't go out soliciting for those awards. He didn't go out trying to "make a name for himself." They just happened. Now, to him, he may not ever say this, but to him, that meant more than anything that's ever happened. Because, it meant that somebody was noticing who he was as a person; that what he was doing was important, that he was making a difference. And, I think, at that point in his life, he needed that. So, to go to that gala and have that surprise, was probably the best thing for him. And now he wants to go, because he's older, and now he's getting the whole girl thing. And the dance afterwards, and things like that are super important to him and he loves having that experience. But those first two awards, he got, those first two years, I think, kind of, shaped how he looked at himself, and gave him confidence that "yeah, this was hard. And it was, but it was worth it. Because look what I have out of it." *Mattering is motivating.*
>
> **Interviewer:** I had no idea those were so meaningful to Cameron. Most schools are set up to serve a traditional bell curve. And those kiddos in the margins can be marginalized. And we're set up to do the exact opposite. We take those kids in the margins, we scoop

them up and really care about them. I wrote down what you said: Mattering is motivating, and that's exactly what we are trying to do. And it's very, very motivating to me, to see that that's coming across. I mean, we can sit here and cry together over those awards, about how Cameron feels about them. We sit there in admin meetings, and we're like, "We're printing 375 awards this year. Do the students even care about this? Is it worth the time?"

Cassandra: I'll take a picture of his room, where he's got them.

Interviewer: Please do. And I make the argument every year. You have no idea which kids benefit, that this may be the only award that they have ever gotten.

Cassandra: It might be.

Interviewer: And it very well is, for a lot of these kids.

Cassandra: You guys might be the only people that have ever believed in these children. Some kids don't have the parental support, and we realize that, that's a truth. That's real life.

Interviewer: And if they don't come to the Gala, we mail the awards to them.

Cassandra: So, they still get them?

Interviewer: They still get them. Whether they show up or not.

Cassandra: So, yeah. Like you were saying, you don't know what kind of an impact you're having on these kids, because you guys sit in offices, and, kind of, in the background. But then, the reward is going to come later, when they look back and they go, "Because you believed in me. I didn't give up. I kept trying, because I felt like what I was doing made a difference." And from a parent's perspective, who really, truthfully cares about who my children are, and what they do. That makes for … that if he were to

> tell me they have straight As and he's not a behavior problem in class. Because truthfully, nobody remembers school. I don't remember what I did in fifth and sixth grade. But I remember [how] my 6th grade teacher made me feel. And that matters.
>
> **Interviewer:** You go out, and it's that difference making, is what makes the world a better place. Honestly, if we could all go out and make some sort of difference like that, the whole world would be a better place.
>
> **Cassandra:** So, better. And that's one of the things I teach my students, from day one. You guys are never going to know what kind of impact you have on these people. You're going to see these people on the worst days of their lives. But they'll remember. They'll remember how you made them feel. And you know what? And what if that was the only time that they felt loved? What if that was the only time that they felt that they mattered? Are you going to be the person that makes me feel mattered or are you going to be the person that kicks them while they're down?

Cassandra highlights that the essence of mattering is how the teachers make the students feel. Their actions, by making time for them, noticing the students, and recognizing their efforts all communicate that they matter, and mattering is motivating.

In addition to the experience with the awards at the gala, Cassandra shared her perspective on how she would describe the school to someone else. For her, the biggest motivating factor in having a student attend was that students matter to the teachers.

> If I were to describe it to another parent, I would say, “Well, first of all, it's not easy. But it's better than what you have.” It's something that can be tailored to meet the needs of your individual child. If you're struggling with something, we have a genuine feel that Cameron, as a student, and us as parents, really, truthfully matter. Where in a district full

> of thousands of children, kids sometimes don't matter. But I can honestly tell you, that we feel like we matter to this group of people. They care about Cameron's education. They care about where he is in the process, especially with having an IEP. They care about his progress, and making sure that they're setting things at his level to get him to progress, not to keep him where he is, but to getting to progress. And I've told other parents this, as well. It's been the best decision we ever made, ever made with Cameron's school. It's worth it. It's hard, but it's worth it.

Cassandra articulates that the experience at the school is not easy but it is worth it because of the educational experience and because the teachers care about the students, their IEPs, and their success.

Teachers and curriculum. Another theme that emerged was how deliberately hiring teachers with strong instructional design skills and using adaptable open educational resource (OER) curriculum coupled with individualized accommodations created a personalized educational option for the student.

Danielle discovered that homeschooling and trying to create a curriculum was more difficult than it seemed. She knew she needed a school with a flexible, standards-aligned curriculum that could be adapted to meet Drake's needs, and teachers that would hold students accountable.

> You've crafted a group of teachers and you've been very deliberate in their hiring. You've put together a group of teachers that really care but also, they hold students to a higher standard, which I should mention is one of my favorite things about the school. So, there's a big difference in the quality of people you hire. They care and they are not going to accept poor work. One of my biggest pet peeves in public [neighborhood] school is

> they allow children to get away with grammar errors, punctuation errors, spelling errors, misuse of the apostrophe is rampant. I know that and you're laughing because you get it!

Danielle recognized that quality teachers who care and hold students accountable was a result of deliberate hiring practices.

Cassandra was looking for a setting where Cameron could have access to grade level curriculum, but she also knew he needed some modifications to scaffold instruction to help him achieve grade-level reading and math and that it would take some time. She evaluated two other online schools before hearing about Mountain Heights as an option.

> So, the other two schools that we had been looking at didn't have the ability to change the curriculum. Or that's what they told us. They said, "Well, if he's in seventh grade, then he'll have to do grade level stuff." And when I tried to explain that, by age, yes, he is in seventh grade but he still reads on a second or a third-grade level, and he's not on grade level math. And I have an IEP, and we need a little bit of modification. Neither of the two schools were willing to make those modifications easy. We would have to bring in paperwork, which I get. We have to bring in the IEP to prove that. I get that, but not "Hey, okay. Yeah, no problem. We'll work with you." It was "No. We can't do that." Like, right off the bat. "No, we can't do that. He has to be in grade level." Okay. All right. So, we were trying to figure out. And in addition to when we would look at the sample programs that they had them on their website, online. They seemed really convoluted, and difficult to manage. So, when we were able to look at how your program is run, and the sample stuff that we were seeing online. It was so much easier to understand how things worked, if that makes sense.

Cassandra perceived that the other online schools she explored were less willing to accommodate Cameron and make modifications to the curriculum in order to help him. Their programs, from her perspective, also seemed more difficult to navigate.

Cassandra was also concerned about Cameron performing well below grade level in prior settings, and the amount of time she was spending each night trying to help him get caught up to his peers. Cassandra and Cameron came to the school with accommodations in an IEP that they did not feel were working well for them, to the point that Cassandra felt the IEP was useless. The IEP case manager was able to adapt the IEP to the online setting, implement appropriate accommodations, and work with Cameron's teachers to adapt his curriculum to meet his needs.

> **Cassandra:** So, when we first came, we had a really terrible IEP. It had been terribly written. It had been terribly modified. It didn't seem like it was working. It just wasn't something that I thought would not really, truthfully matter. But, knowing, because that he's got it, he can have the accommodations…Mrs. Winters took all that paperwork. She sat down. She went through it with a fine-toothed comb. And she's like, "Oh well, yeah, we can make these changes." And I was like, "Okay. Sure. Show me." And she did. She laid it all out. She's like "No, you know what? We're going to have reduction in class work. We're going to follow this. We're going to follow that." And she followed the pieces and came up with another IEP or, I don't know what they're called. Like a revisit. A new one for the next one.
>
> **Interviewer:** A re-evaluation. It had been three years since his prior testing.
>
> **Cassandra:** Yeah, and she was like, "Yep. This is what we're going to do. He's going to have a reduction in the workload. He's going to have the ability to have no timers on his things." She followed each piece. She understood each piece and followed it and put each

> piece into the new plan. “This is how it's going to work” and I was like, “So you really read it. You really read it?” She's like, “Of course I read it. This looks great.” We didn't know her. We'd never met her before that first meeting type thing. She was enthusiastic about him, and where he'd been, and what progress she felt he could do. She was realistic about that progress, but she was enthusiastic about that. She challenged him. Even though she says, “Yeah we’ll reduce the workload a little bit, but he's still gonna have to work,” she didn't give him a pass. She just recognized where he was, where she felt he could be, and gave us a very clear, definitive path.

Once Cameron’s accommodations were in place, Mrs. Winters worked with him and his teacher to make adjustments and to motivate him to try his hardest and to do his best work. Cassandra explained:

> That first couple of progress reports that we got from her, were full of “He is working so hard. He's doing so great.” Nothing, but accolades for him. And he exploded with … “I don't know, I want to try harder for her. She said I can do it. Of course, mom can say you can do it all day long, but Mrs. Winters said I can do it, when I meet with her, she's really excited about that, and I want to try, because I want to make her feel like what she's doing …” you know what I mean? So, that first little bit was amazing, because she really, kind of, in addition to the whole change up of everything, she really, kind of, gave him a little bit of self-esteem, that I don't think he knew he had when it came to that, because he knows he's different. He knows he can't read very well. I mean, he can do really well, now, but back then he knew he couldn't read very well. He knew other people knew it. And he was treated differently. She didn't treat him any differently. In fact, she treated him as if he was the best student in the world and could do hard things. He didn't believe

> that in himself, but when she believed it in him, she made him feel that he could. So, in the beginning, yeah, it was fantastic.

Mrs. Winters continued to work with all of Cameron's teachers on the reading level of his curriculum to make accommodations occasionally, to tier and adjust the content as appropriate, and to help Cameron continue to progress on a weekly basis.

> Over time, they've just built on that. "Okay. Well, we're going to tweak it just a little bit. We're going to change just a few things here and there, because you're doing great. And let us know of this doesn't work," type deal. So, it's been it's been a good thing. It's been an absolutely amazing, miraculous type thing to watch, because we were so whatever. IEP, okay. But she's like, "No. IEP. Great. Woo-hoo!" So, excited about it. So, I think, it definitely made a difference, having her have that enthusiasm, to making it better for him.

Cassandra pointed out that the biggest factor in selecting the school was that Cameron needed access to a teacher who could help him.

> But ultimately the biggest decision that led us this way … once we looked at the website, once we were thinking those kinds of things was the ability for him to try something different, but he recognized, I think, in the beginning that it was going to be better. He had the flexibility that he needed, and after having a year that was difficult, but having access to a teacher anytime he needed help with the district's program, he needed that. And we recognized that he needed access to a teacher. He needed the ability to think, "I have a question. Hey, can you help me with this?" And to have access to that teacher. And he didn't get that sitting in a classroom full of 33 kids that can't be quiet.

Cassandra once again mentioned that because Cameron was not a "behavior problem" her perception was that he did not get the academic assistance he needed to progress at grade level.

She recognized that Cameron received personalized accommodations at the school because he learned differently from other students and conveyed her gratitude.

> One of the things that that I've seen in my 26 years of education, especially in special education, you get, “Oh, you're doing a great job. You don't cause any problems. So, just sit in the corner. You're so cute. Here's a sticker.” That, kind of a thing, and then you get the behavior problems, and the academics seems like it's way down the priorities. As long as you're not causing any problems, we're not really equipped to help you. Gosh. I don't know. We absolutely, we're definitely, definitely grateful that whatever vision you had so many years ago, that you followed it. Because, knowing how hard everything was for him before, and how it's still hard, but he's different, in such a good way. It really has made a difference to us and our family, because of what you've done. Because you recognized that there could be something different, and it's still okay, because children are different and that's okay. It's definitely made it so I don't have to worry as much about my children and about their education, because of you guys, because we have you.

Cassandra valued the experience at Mountain Heights because the teachers recognized that while Cameron learned differently that can be a good thing.

Cameron held an interesting perspective on his disability and how the accommodations and teachers worked for him. He knew he was a slow reader and he knew he learned differently. He felt like the expectations for what he should do in his prior brick-and-mortar setting were not clear. And, he seemed to feel that his teachers in his brick-and-mortar setting had a poor understanding of why he wasn’t doing well on his work. Cameron contrasted that prior experience with his perception of how he was able to access his current teachers and to receive fairly immediate assistance.

Cameron: I didn't like being in a class of 30 where I'm sitting there, not knowing what to do or what is expected of me and then turn around and have people be like, “Well, he doesn't do it and why doesn't he do it?” I've heard from other people being like the teachers coming and saying, “This person's stupid. He doesn't do it. He doesn't know how to do it.” Well, take the time to understand him first and then understand what he does. I get in a class of 30 and I can't just sit and work on something with this guy. Which is one thing that's great about Mountain Heights is that if I have questions, I can just contact my teachers and be like, “Hey, can you help me real quick?” “Oh sure, let's do it.” I've done that so many times, it's amazing.

Interviewer: That sounds really frustrating to be sitting in a class of 30 kids and not feel like you know what's going on and not be able to get help. Am I understanding what you're saying?

Cameron: Yeah. I felt like I was in the shadows for the longest time. That's one thing that Mountain Heights has really done is just bring me out into the light. I've gone from doing fifth grade level below average work to now shooting up to … I'm on grade level math, I'm on grade level reading. I'm on grade level in basically everything except for a couple things.

Cameron seemed to be fairly self-aware of his academic performance levels and I wanted to explore that and understand how he knew that he was on grade-level for reading. He seemed very proud of his progress. He took particular pride in the fact that some people in his prior schools did not think he would be able to read on grade level and now he is.

Interviewer: How do you know that?

Cameron: I've been told from my directed studies teacher, “You have shot up so much.” And my mom keeps a … what is it? Spreadsheet of where I started and where I'm at now. She showed me one day, “Look right here. You have shot up two grade levels in the past year.”

Interviewer: That's awesome.

Cameron: And I'm like, wow. I'll see some of my old teachers and one of them, she used to help me with reading, and she would actually be the one to take the time and help me. I saw her one day and she said, “How is school?” I'm like, “School is good.” And I told her, “I'm in a good program. I'm basically on grade level.” And she's like, “That is amazing.” Because at the time people would always think, “He won't be on grade level. He won't do anything on grade level.” And here I am thanks to Mountain Heights. It's been amazing.

Interviewer: How does that make you feel?

Cameron continued to compare and contrast his prior experience with concrete examples of what happened then versus what happened at Mountain Heights Academy. He also offered his thoughts on what kind of a student he would have become if he had stayed in a brick-and-mortar setting.

It makes me feel good because I say to a lot of people, “If I was in a brick-and-mortar school I would be failing classes and I would be ditching. I would not be here. I'd probably run away.” Like that's the hard truth that I would be troubled. I would say no a lot of times or I would cuss out the teacher, but thanks to Mountain Heights I have been okay.

Cameron also identified one of the reasons he fell behind in his brick-and-mortar school. The class seemed to move too quickly for him, and he missed portions of the content as a result. Because Cameron could access the content digitally at Mountain Heights anytime, he took advantage of the opportunity to reread content that didn't make sense the first time and felt like he got more out of the lessons. Cameron explained:

> I know that if I need help, I can go get help and I won't be stuck below grade level. And that's another thing is that they [teachers in his prior brick-and-mortar school] would be doing a lesson and I would kind of understand it but not fully and then they're like, "Has everybody got it?" And everybody said yes. If I would have a question, I couldn't ask it because the teacher would say, "Okay, moving on," and erase the whole board and I would lose everything. That's one thing here where if I have questions I can go back, I would re-watch it; I re-read it. I feel like I'm getting something out of it and not like I'm just another kid.

Cameron recognized the advantage of having the content available to him in an online setting so he could control the frequency of interaction and access. If he missed something, he could watch or read it again.

I was struck by the imagery Cameron used to describe his previous setting, "living in the shadows" and I wanted to probe a little more as to why it felt that way to him. He focused specifically on access to the teachers who had the time to work with him. He also discussed having teachers who took the time to personalize the content just for him and how that made him feel more involved in the lessons rather than being a passive participant.

> **Interviewer:** I wrote down that quote that you felt like you were in the shadows for the longest time. That's hard to hear and I'm glad that you don't feel that way anymore.

Cameron: So, it was really hard. That's basically how my life was for the first part was like shadows and then once I hit middle school and I came here it's been like whoa, this is what I've missed? You guys are there for me instead of having a teacher teaching one lesson and then being done. I feel like I'm more involved in the lessons than anything and that you are … and I hear this time and time again. "We're here for you if you need help. We're here for you to answer questions." And I couldn't get that in a brick-and-mortar school. That would suck. With my track history it's like I'm there, that doesn't mean I'm learning something.

Or I'm there, that doesn't mean I'm getting anything out of this. But here it's like I'm there, I'm getting something and the teachers make it fun, the teachers make it worth my while. In health just now I listened to a comedian and it's just like, "How does it get this good and it ties into lesson?" Like lessons tie in. It's not like you start in one topic and you go off track, like a million other things and then you come back. That's in brick-and-mortar school, but here it's like you're trying to focus on one topic, and then if it doesn't make sense there's another topic waiting. I did that with math, in math like with FOILing. I couldn't just FOIL everything. And I told my teacher I was like, "I don't get this. I don't understand." She's like, "What about boxes. Do you know about those?" I was like, "What?" She's like, "Boxes." And she showed me how to do these boxes. I'm like, "Why didn't you tell me this before?" There are other keys that the teachers can use if that doesn't work, and that's the greatest thing. It's like this has helped me so much. And I told my teacher that. I was like, "This helped me so much better than this." She's like, "Okay, I'll keep that in mind next time." It's amazing, I love it.

Cameron was particularly invested in an example of a teacher spending time to adjust the content specifically for him in math when he was not grasping the concept of FOILing (an acronym for factoring; First, Outside, Inside, Last). Cameron recognized that what worked for the majority of the students did not work for him. He valued the time the teacher took to work with him to find a way to adapt the content to meet his needs. He also recognized that the content was relevant, even if it was listening to a comedian in health class.

> **Interviewer:** Interesting. So, what is the difference? How does your teacher know that boxes will help you or how does she have the ability to help you figure out that boxes worked for you when FOILing doesn't?
>
> **Cameron:** It's just mainly contacting. Like I was like having a really tough time with FOILing and getting all the answers. It's like, I don't get this. And I would always check if she was online and she's on, do I wanna contact her and be like, “Hey, I don't get this.” And it's just a matter of will I? It's not a matter of I need help this instance. It's a matter of do I wanna keep trying to figure this out on my own or do I wanna ask for help? And at that point I was like I need to ask [for] help. I don't get this. And then I told her I was like, “I don't get this.” And she would show me how to do it in FOILing and I was like, “But that still doesn't make any sense.” Then she's like, “Okay, well boxes.” And she showed me how to do boxes and she's like, “Try the next problem on your own.” And I tried it and I got it right. I tried the next one and I got it right. Got it right, got it right. Because these boxes. I'm like, “This is awesome.” Like why do you have to do this first? *And sometimes I get other people do other things differently and you have to focus on the majority but there's always that one thing that's like works better for somebody different. And that's the key in this and it works for me different.*

Cameron seemed to be very self-aware about the fact that he learns differently from the majority of the other students which made him appreciate the time his teachers spent working to find solutions that worked specifically for him as an individual. Additionally, Cameron appreciated the accommodations he received as a result of his IEP and that he had a Directed Studies teacher who would work with him to help keep him on track as needed. Cameron explained:

> Okay, so the IEPs it's like saying, "This is where you started. This is where you are now." But it's felt like a big help. And I know other people are like, "Well I don't have an IEP and everything's hard." Well, okay. But just keep in mind, look where you are and look where I am. Like, look where I started out. And that's another thing is like I say, "Look where I started out. This is where I started out and look where I've gotten because of this. Because of how this has worked for me. You? You've been steady your whole life." But for me, I hear this from my mom, is like I have worked harder than anybody else that gets to my level. Like they just go, "I passed, I passed." I have had to work my entire life to just be on grade level. Like that's the hardest part. So, it's like with an IEP, it helps, and it reduces the amount of work. That's another thing is it reduces the work, true. It makes me so I don't have a lot of assignments, true. Does that mean the assignments are gonna be easier? No. Because of my IEP I feel like my assignments are harder. Like, combined into two, and they're harder and they're worth something where I can just go and do. They're worth … I don't know how to put this into words. They're worth just making sure I get everything right. With less assignments I get everything right. With more assignments I have the chance to slip up every now and then. With the IEP, it's like, I don't slip up because I know what I need to do, I know how I need to do it. It just helps and with my directive studies teacher, well with all my teachers they've been great helps

> and they've been amazing and amazing helping me because they would always chat me and be like, “Hey I see this is kind of low do you wanna talk about it?” Sure. I would just tell them, like with Mrs. Winters I would say … She would always chat me and be like, “Hey Cameron, I see this is just like a couple points behind. I know that this isn't normally you. Can we just talk for a minute and make sure everything's okay?” And that's … they've always been there to help. They've always been there and been like, “while I've been here, I've gotten everything for you and you just need to ask.” So, it helped a lot.

Cameron liked having access to the teachers, the ability they had to customize the curriculum to meet his needs, and the accommodations he received as a result of his IEP. Cassandra expounded on what that looked like from her perspective.

> So here, because of his IEP. And I've never… looked at another … Well, I guess, I can compare it with my nephew. I know he has less assignments, because it takes him longer to do each assignment. And sometimes, especially in English, if the student or the teacher wants them to answer 15 questions, she'll only asked Cameron to answer 10. So, she reduces it that way, because she knows it's difficult for him there. So, he doesn't have to do as many. Or he has to do smaller portions of it. He still has to generally have the general understanding of the assignment, but they had to read Fahrenheit 451 last semester, and they had it online, which was good, because it could read to him, and he understood as a lot more than if he had a book in hand. And she would have him … she would say, “Cameron, you only need to answer questions one, five, seven,” whatever. Certain questions. But then there'd be 20 questions on there. But they were the questions that, I think, well to the very root of what he was reading. So, she was very aware of what

> was most important; what she felt was most important, getting out of what they had just read, and making sure that he understood that by giving him just those questions, because some of the other questions, were just thought-provoking, but not really to the root of what you just read. And she just made sure that he was given right to the root of what he needed.

Cassandra demonstrated that she understood the process that the English teachers used to customize the curriculum for Cameron by keeping the core elements of the assignment but reducing the workload to fit his needs.

Benjamin also appreciated the guided notes and the videos that were customized to the level of his students, Brinley and Brady. When asked about the experiences that benefited his two students, he highlighted the curriculum, the teachers' ability to adapt it in order to personalize it for his children, and that the teachers care about them and are willing to work with the family to help the students succeed.

> And just the notes and the videos that they have tailored to their needs as well, they're at their level I guess you can say. They're interactive enough where they can understand because I've watched the videos with Brady and Brinley and they're very understandable. Biology is such a hard subject to grasp anyway that within the videos, the people that are interacting with them, are talking at their level, the words that they're using, you tailor to their needs and that's what I like. And then they have notes they can take that are on the screen as well as in the book they can write down information too, but just with all the different resources. And the teachers, they care, they're experienced, their willingness to help, I guess. And sometimes they're willing to change things too. I know with Mrs. Ellerbee, she's like, "I'm working on better videos, you know, for them so that they can

> understand a little bit better." She's searching and that's what she told us, she's like, "I'm searching for some better videos." And she's even open to suggestions from me, she said "If you ever see anything …." And that's the great thing with her, you know? And so, they're always willing to improve. I see that on both ends of the spectrum. And that gives good results for the students to help them succeed and accomplish. The teachers, they interact with you, they tailor to fit your needs, they tailor the lessons or the subjects to their needs and they just have the background experiences as well as the gala at the end of the year, but the interactions with the students on a day to day basis, you will never have anywhere else I don't feel like. Because they care.

Benjamin had some specific examples of teachers not just adjusting but improving content to meet student needs, as one teacher searched for better videos and others created scaffolded supports like guided notes. He also pointed out that the language in the videos was grade level appropriate.

Allison focused intensively on Ashley's specific disability and her need for patient teachers who could help move her forward in small increments due to her particular processing needs.

> I appreciate the flexibility and the accommodations. I think that's what I've been really interested in for Ashley are the accommodations and the fact that because she does have challenges with processing speed and retention and mental fatigue. I think maybe the problem is that they were expecting six hours a day at the high school level and that's just not possible with Ashley. You can't do it all in one block. And we chose this school because I was picking up on the accommodations, the flexibility, the customization that

was possible. Those were the things that gave me that comfort level that this would be a good way to go.

Allison quickly noticed that the school could customize the class lessons for each student.

> The teachers have been very supportive of Ashley. They've really helped her a lot. She has real short-term memory issues and so what could sound like, “the dog ate my homework” excuse to somebody, for Ashley it's really real. You can really remind her of something and 30 seconds later it could just be gone. But her teachers have just worked with that and not assumed that she's not being honest or that she's just making up excuses or she's not trying. You know and there have been times where she just hits the wall. She's just done and she's done for a day or sometimes even two or three but they are willing to open up assignments for her again, just revisit things that maybe they already went over several times before. I think that's been more than just a single event, that has been the best thing, the most positive thing for me as a parent and I think Ashley as a student, just the teachers and their attitude. MHA has definitely been the best fit for us and the most accommodating.

Allison highlights the teacher involvement and the ability to accommodate her daughter as the main reason she likes the school. She also contrasted the experience with Mountain Heights Academy with an experience at a prior school. She pointed out that they had other priorities to focus on that made it more difficult to meet the needs of students on IEPs.

> And I really like what you said about being there to serve the students because honestly with a couple of organizations I haven't felt that. I felt that they do have funding to worry about. They do have graduation requirements to worry about. I think in the case of another school, they're very thorough, that it's a rigorous program, but their students can

> do well on the ACT. That's their niche. I get that. I understand that but that does make it difficult for kids with special needs to find a way to succeed there. I don't want it to sound like I don't appreciate the efforts that they made. They did try to make some effort. That's not what their program is about. In other schools they don’t care what you don't know. It doesn't even matter what you don't know. You move on anyway and you never learned it and that's basically the experience that I had, my older children had, but these girls it's different. It is changing. The accommodations now make it possible for them to keep moving forward, which they can. They can keep moving forward. It's just they have to do it a little differently.

She seemed frustrated that students were moved on whether or not they learned the material. Allison then gave a specific example of how an English teacher spent time working with Ashley and providing her with individual attention to write an essay. It was a frustrating experience for Ashley but the teacher kept working with her and explaining the process in a different way to keep her moving forward until she accomplished her goal.

> I've been grateful that we could find a way for Ashley, especially to keep going forward. Her head would just literally hurt. She had to write the essay and she's kind of going back and forth with one of her teachers and just getting more and more frustrated because the teacher was trying to help but she wasn't understanding. She'd rewrite it and submit it and the teacher was saying you need to do this. She'd say but I just did. That's just what I did. She's getting more and more frustrated. That teacher just hung in there with her. Just hung in there and kept thinking of different ways that she could explain it, different ways that she could help Ashley keep moving forward incrementally and you know when I sat down with her and gave her the essay outline and went through and give me an example

> of this. Why do you think that? Give me a detail to support that. I think between the teacher continuing to try and Ashley being able to take some time to just step back and kind of unwind, step back from the cliff a little bit, she was finally able to succeed. If she had been sitting in a classroom somewhere, it just would have been a complete meltdown because she would have gotten more and more and more frustrated. She wouldn't have been able to get the individual attention, the follow up. I truly appreciated the support from MHA for Ashley because life has just been unbelievable. These last few years, every time I think, okay, I found my feet again, here comes the next wave. I really appreciated that. I honestly don't think that she would have succeeded or been able to graduate without MHA.

Allison recognized that Ashley had to work harder to move forward than other students but that the teachers invested the time and effort with her to make that happen. They also made the appropriate accommodations to help her succeed.

And Ashley developed a rapport with those teachers that allowed her to continue to work with them even when she was tired and when it was difficult for her.

> I find it very helpful, and they talk about their time and how they did it when they were your age, that kind of thing. Mrs. Garza, when I had her in the ninth and tenth grade… it was just fun to contact each other and be friendly, even though they're like way older than you, and you're like "Oh, right."

Each family shared at least one in-depth example of a teacher customizing their students' learning experience by presenting the material in a different way or by adapting the OER content so it was more palatable for the student. The combination of working with a teacher who had the

time available to interact with students, plus the ability to customize the OER content specifically to meet student needs created a meaningful educational experience for each family.

Social safety and connection. One of the most interesting emergent and polarizing themes in the interviews was the perception of access to social opportunities. Prior to enrolling at the school parents were concerned about their students spending time on a computer all day and not having a social life, while the students seemed to not only have had plenty of access to social situations but have thrived socially in this online setting. They seemed to have found a safe place to develop social skills that are not on daily display so if they make a social faux pas at a school activity they can recover privately and have time to build up confidence and try again. Additionally, these students are keenly aware of what it felt like to not be included based on negative prior educational experiences and they seemed eager to create a welcoming environment for others.

Benjamin shared that his biggest hesitation about enrolling Brady and Brinley was spending all of their time online. “Well, my biggest concern was just being in front of the computer, to be honest with you. The social aspect of it, that was my concern the whole time.” However, once they enrolled in the school and started attending, Benjamin’s viewpoint changed.

> [They] do offer outside activities, for example, sign language. He had a sign language teacher that would meet at libraries. They met at libraries and they also did a play. They actually went to a deaf facility school and they sign language stories. He really liked that and those are some interactions. When he started doing those things, I overcame that, like wow, okay, so he's not just going to just be all day long in front of his computer, you know? And then the gala, I will say that one is always fun to interact with teachers … and

> we have a Lagoon day. I will say we had the barbecue at the beginning of the year where we can interact with teachers as well. That was awesome too, to kind of meet in person.

Benjamin also explained that while there are in person social activities he was also impressed and surprised by the amount of online interaction that took place on a daily basis between students and counselors, teachers, and peers.

> But just interacting with a counselor, even online. It wasn't just online, taking classes, what I thought it was. There's more interaction. There are the videos, there's live chat rooms, there's live people that could actually talk to you on the screen and that's what I liked about it. But at first yeah, the negative part was the social aspect and just sitting in front of the computer all day, I'm like, "really? Where's the social aspect?" That was my concern when we first started this whole thing, you know. And that was my perspective, you know? Coming from a family where it was all traditional school stuff, oh charter school, really? And I grew up that way. I just get it from my parents…. But that was the negative side first was just the social aspect…. And that's what I thought at first, that part of it and just not sitting in front of a computer all day.
>
> **Interviewer:** Yeah, and that's so interesting because when I asked your kids about their favorite thing, they both grinned and said, "I like this activity, and this activity, and this activity." And then they were telling me that they get together with friends outside of school that they've met at Mountain Heights and I had no idea that that was happening at that level with so many of our students and it just makes me really happy.

While Benjamin was surprised that an online school offered a variety of in person and online social activities and interaction, he was not surprised to learn that the social aspect of the school was something that Brady and Brinley enjoyed a lot. Brinley explained:

What I like best is all the activities. That's what I like best. And I like to go to prom and how do they do the courses and the classes and all the teachers. They're good.

Interviewer: Nice. Tell me about your social life. Do you ever get together with kids at Mountain Heights outside of school?

Brinley: I hang out with this one kid named Carter. We went to a dance together.

Interviewer: Really? That's so fun! And how did you meet him?

Brinley: We met last year at the gala and then we didn't talk for a whole year and then he chatted me on Google Hangouts.

Interviewer: So, you met in person first and now you chat? Cool.

I was surprised to learn that students were meeting at school social activities and then continuing the social interaction on their own outside of structured activities, whether it was chatting online or informally in person.

Brinley enjoyed attending a lot of social activities and meeting other students. One interesting aspect of meeting someone in person is the ability to continue the relationship online via chat or in person outside of school activities. Benjamin's son, Brady, identified the clubs and social activities as one of his top three favorite things about the school as well. He shared that he occasionally meets up with his current friend group who are students he met at formal school activities and service projects.

Brady: What I like about the school is the clubs. Like, there's very fun stuff about the clubs. Like I have a fitness club that I went to and we went to the skating thing and you do, like, fun stuff. And having a prom at the Capitol. I think that was a good experience going to the Capitol. It's good to learn about that kind of stuff. That was really fun stuff. I like the food bank stuff too. I didn't go this year but I still like that.

Interviewer: That's awesome.

Brady: Yeah sometimes I go to Starbucks or whatever and work there.

Interviewer: How come? Why do you go to Starbucks to work?

Brady: It's really quiet so sometimes the house gets too noisy so sometimes I go there to focus on homework. It's just a different place to go around and sometimes I get bored just being in my room.

Interviewer: That's really interesting I wouldn't have thought about that! Sometimes people think that online school is, you know, just independent study. That you log in and you do your work. There's no social interaction.

Brady: The social life. The school is really good about that and your parties. And you can text your friends and meet up with them or something. So, I like that.

Interviewer: Do you do that? Do you get together in person with kids you meet at Mountain Heights?

Brady: Yeah. Like kids I meet at the club parties.

Interviewer: That's awesome.

Brady enjoyed the social aspect of attending the school and spent time socializing at organized school events, with school friends on his own, and interacting with them online too.

Cameron also talked extensively about meeting up with friends he had met at school activities. He focused on friends who had been through similar life experiences such as divorce and being bullied and he specifically looked for other students who seemed like they were struggling and not fitting in because he knew what that felt like and he wanted them to know they weren't alone.

> The thing that does really hit home is the friends. There's other kids in here that have the same things that I have [referencing his learning disability]. Or that are divorced children. It's like I have a lot to connect to with them. Like last year I found my friend and she was sitting by herself with her dad at the gala. I kept saying, “Oh come on, come dance.” And little did I know, the last song was a slow song so I went and said, “Okay, you have to come dance for this song.” She's like, “Are you asking?” I said, “Then yes.” So she came and she danced with me and I said, “I'll find you next year.” And this year we've been good friends.

Cameron’s particular attitude toward friends is that “you meet new people each time and your community with other people just grows bigger and stronger.” He came from a background of being the “odd man out” and feeling like he was consistently “living in the shadows,” so this exchange was particularly poignant. He seemed to feel an obligation to shepherd other students through the social experience personally. He also made the observation that the online setting provided students with a layer of anonymity to relieve enough of the social pressure of making a mistake to continue to take social risks; specifically, because not everyone knows each other, it was acceptable to make mistakes.

> **Interviewer:** I notice that at the activities you're reaching out to those kids who are in the shadows and pulling them out. That's super important and I appreciate that about you.
>
> **Cameron:** Because I know what the shadows are. I know how they feel, so it's like no, come out of the shadows. And to get out of their comfort zone. And here's the funny thing, if you mess up, everybody lives somewhere else. So, you don't see them on a daily basis. That's another thing. You can be yourself and you can just be funny and then other people will be like, “Oh, he's funny.” And just be crazy. That's another thing. If you mess

up in a brick-and-mortar school you're gonna get laughed at. You're gonna be like, “Oh that's the person who's weird.” Because everybody knows everybody. You don't know everybody here so…you be yourself and you just don't worry about it. And they'll always come up and be like, “Hi, I don't think you remember me but I was at the party last time.” And I'll say, “Oh yeah, I do remember you.” And I'll be there for people and be like, “Oh yeah, let's go. Let's go.” That's one thing that's like, if I find a group of people, I'll stick with them. And I'll make sure that they feel welcomed and everything. That's probably the greatest part is other people will be like, “I want something more but I'm just too scared to go out and do it.” But I'm not.

Interviewer: So, do you feel like your experiences from where you were before have helped you be in a position to help other people?

Cameron: Definitely, definitely.

Interviewer: I think with a lot of people, if they've had experiences, like that it's really easy to just stay in that place, in those shadows. I love that you have recognized that and you're like, “No, I remember you. I know who you are. You matter to me.” You're changing lives and I like that about you a lot.

Cameron: It's like Mountain Heights changed my life, so why can't I change other people's lives as well?”

Cameron seems to have had some very memorable experiences in elementary school of feeling like the “odd man out” and not belonging that shaped his need to help other students navigate awkward social situations in high school.

Summary. In summary, I explored four main interview themes: (a) self-determination, which is defined as having a voice in the educational options for the parent and the student as a

result of negative prior experiences, particularly bullying for students and lack of support for parents; (b) mattering and empowerment, which is defined as feeling like the students and parents matter to the staff and particularly the teachers at the school; (c) the combination of teachers with the capacity to personalize the content to meet student needs coupled with an adaptable digital OER curriculum; and (d) social opportunities.

Parents and students both discussed aspects of self-determination as main reasons for seeking alternatives to their prior educational settings. Danielle knew Drake needed someone other than her to teach the high school curriculum. Once Drake figured out that he was in charge of his own schedule he was more successful because he was responsible for himself. Cassandra spent three hours a night working with Cameron to try to get him caught up, to no avail. Cameron wanted to get away from being bullied and feeling stupid. Allison needed a school setting that would protect Ashley, who looked more mature physically than she was cognitively. Benjamin was looking for a school who could help Brady and Brinley graduate despite their learning disabilities. Brady was looking for a way to get away from the teasing and bullying because of his speech problems, and Brinley needed a break from teachers who wouldn't let her go to the bathroom because of her physical disability.

All of the families described elements of how they and their students mattered to the teachers at the school and provided in-depth examples as evidence of mattering, such as teachers being available, working with students, adapting curriculum, and helping parents. Cameron extended feeling that he mattered to feeling responsible to help other students feel that they mattered.

All of the families were keenly aware of teachers having the ability to customize the curriculum to meet student needs and adapting it for them. The digital curriculum lends itself

well to being revised, especially when teachers have strong instructional design backgrounds and the content is not proprietary. Benjamin and Cassandra were particularly pleased with all of the curriculum adjustments that were made for their students.

The social opportunities resonated with all the students. Having the ability to make a social faux pas and not have to go to a brick-and-mortar building the next day where the students all know each other seemed to provide some social cover that allowed Cameron to be bolder and take more social risks. In turn he worked hard to be more inclusive of other students who were struggling socially. Brady and Brinley thrived on the social opportunities and appreciated being able to participate in many clubs and service-learning activities throughout the year. Accessing social opportunities according to the students' wishes was an unanticipated benefit of attending the school.

CHAPTER 5

Discussion

In order to discuss the most meaningful themes it is important to review the research question: "What are the motives for and experiences of special education families and students attending the school?" In other words, why do they choose this online school and what happens once they enroll? I found that the four most crucial themes are as follows: (a) mattering, (b) social safety and connectedness, (c) OER-enabled pedagogy, and (d) self-determination. I will examine each of these in more detail below.

Mattering

Each family that was interviewed shared personal experiences of not feeling supported in a prior setting, as did many of those who were surveyed. The parents did not feel that staff or administrators listened to their concerns about their children. The students did not feel that their brick-and-mortar systems were designed to allow teachers to give them the individualized time they needed because the class had to move on collectively whether or not the individual students were ready to do so. Furthermore, many students shared personal experiences of being bullied. These elementary and middle school aged students were kicked, hit, verbally abused, teased, and taunted, mostly by their peers, but occasionally the staff hired to teach them may also have crossed professional boundaries in their interactions with these students. When parents intervened on behalf of their students and asked administrators to resolve their concerns, these particular parents generally felt ignored and that their voices did not matter. This was a key factor in deciding to move to another school. Therefore, because parents were concerned about their individual student's well-being, and did not feel supported themselves, the parents sought refuge elsewhere. These families turned to an online school that felt safer, a place they perceived

could provide their students with a greater sense of well-being, and whose staff communicated to both parents and students that they mattered. Thus, the combination of parents not feeling that their voice mattered when the well-being of their student was at stake and students not feeling that they mattered because they were being physically and/or emotionally harmed was what motivated families to look for a different learning environment for their student.

Student well-being is reflected in the literature in a similar manner, showing that students with disabilities and their parents were somewhat more satisfied with their online school settings than they were in their previous brick-and-mortar settings than were their mainstream peers (Beck, Egalite, et al., 2014; Rhim et al., 2008). Students who were surveyed about why they chose to attend an online school responded that they liked having more freedom, they appreciated feeling better by being able to sleep in, and they felt safer and less judged; in short, they had a greater sense of well-being (Beck, Maranto, et al., 2014). They also seemed to be more pleased overall with their online learning experiences than education stakeholders anticipated (Beck, Egalite, et al., 2014; Rhim et al., 2008; Rose & Blomeyer, 2007). Thus, the literature supports students being somewhat more satisfied in an online setting and that safety was one of the reasons why there was a greater sense of well-being.

In order to improve education settings so that parents can feel heard, and so that students can have a greater sense of well-being, the following groups and individuals may be able to implement some of the following suggestions. Multiple stakeholders play a role in improving education settings for the better, including, (a) state legislatures through existing and emerging funding incentives, and changes to the way education appropriations are governed in statute; (b) university teacher preparation programs; and (b) individual educators.

How can legislatures across the country help? We gain some potential local insight into the magnitude of the recommendations from a recently published state report, as an example. According to a collaborative report issued by the Utah Education Policy Center and the Utah State Board of Education which reviewed educator "leavers and movers" over an eight-year period from 2008 to 2015, the research showed that 93% of those teachers were "no longer in the public education system and 7% moved into administrative or other specialist roles" (2017). Additionally, the report highlights that the "vast majority left voluntarily" and there was "not a prominent reason for leaving," although contributing factors included "personal life factors, career factors, school factors, salary and job benefits, and other factors" (2017). This reveals that this state is not retaining teachers for more than a few years, leading to a critical teaching shortage.

In the face of teacher shortages in areas of criticality like special education, the state of Utah incentivizes students to the special education track by offering one year of tuition forgiveness for each year they teach in the state if they apply for and receive the T.H. Bell scholarship. While commendable, it is not enough, and it may inadvertently contribute to a revolving door teacher turnover issue that plagues not only Utah but states across the nation as well. Newer teachers need mentoring and support from established teachers and those seem to be in short supply. The lack of experienced teachers and the lack of mentoring could explain the lack of support some families were feeling.

While salary and benefits are only one of the factors mentioned in the report, state legislatures, district superintendents, and charter school principals can signal to the community that our most vulnerable populations are a priority by earmarking additional funding for our special educators. One local example of additional funding for special education occurred in the

2018 legislative session in Utah. The Teacher Salary Supplement Program, which provides a stipend of several thousand dollars for specific science, technology, and math teachers, was extended to include a stipend for special educators too. Providing additional monetary stipends directly to the educator working with the students is a step in the right direction toward keeping teachers from leaving the classroom in the first few years of teaching. More can be done.

In order to effectively interact with each family and to take the time to build meaningful relationships that communicate support and mattering, district and charter principals must use the additional funding already appropriated for students with disabilities to keep caseloads manageable and reasonable. In order to provide a truly individualized education program (IEP) as required by federal statute, along with having time to support the parent to ensure that they understand the process and the accommodations or modifications being provided, the student to teacher ratios need to remain at reasonable levels of under 25 students each, with paraprofessional support as needed. The rationale for this is simple, as has been demonstrated in the surveys and interviews: because of the level of interaction between the school personnel, the parent, and the student, each student with disabilities should be weighted double when considering the student to teacher ratio due to the demands of fostering the parent relationship in addition to serving the needs of the student. As such, state legislatures should consider double funding students with disabilities with state funds like the weighted pupil unit (WPU) as an example. Those funds should be appropriated specifically to cap caseloads at a reasonable amount as determined by each Local Education Agency (LEA) administrative team. When each special educator is provided with adequate time to support each student and parent, they will be able to more effectively meet their needs in addition to communicating that the parents and students matter and are important to them.

Absent additional monies to double fund students with disabilities through the WPU, the legislature could consider passing legislation that would give more local fiscal control to each LEA so that principals, rather than district business managers, could determine how to spend each school's funds. Without the stringent requirements of following a district regulated budget, principals could theoretically have more flexibility to hire additional teachers for students with disabilities to keep caseloads low for their most vulnerable population. They could also consider stipends for seasoned educators to retain them as mentors for the newer teachers so they can focus on capacity building.

Many teaching universities already ensure that students in the colleges of education shadow a teacher for a week or two in their first year of the program so that teacher candidates are not surprised by the level of difficulty of working with students with disabilities. It is often a difficult and thankless position. As one of the parents, Cassandra, stated in her interview, "Mattering is motivating." It is equally important for our educators to feel that they matter in order to communicate that same sentiment to the families. Building communities of practice while still in the university program so that special educators have a way to build capacity, network outside of their individual schools, and take time to recharge through mini-sabbaticals may also improve retention rates and personal interactions with the families.

Finally, and most importantly, individual responsibility rests with each administrator, teacher, paraprofessional, and staff member in every public school to treat every parent and student with the dignity they deserve. When parents' and students' needs are met, they feel heard and supported. They know that they matter, and the sense of students' well-being will increase. Additionally, when teachers have the time they need to foster personal relationships and make a difference in the lives of their students both their job satisfaction and teacher retention increase.

Many families left their prior educational settings not just because they were bullied or treated poorly, but because they felt that their concerns were dismissed by the educators tasked with helping them. In short, they felt that they did not matter. In order to solve this issue, legislatures, academics, and educators can and must do our part through funding, preparation, and individual responsibility because we have a moral obligation to treat our families better. This is a problem worth solving.

Many of the students shared personal examples of being bullied by peers and staff at their prior school. One student was repeatedly kicked while another was taunted for his speech impediment. Another student was harassed by school staff and one student was beaten up by the principal's son. These are difficult stories to hear, let alone to process, but it is easy to understand how these experiences served as a catalyst to find a different, safer setting even though parents may have been generally concerned about the lack of social opportunity online. The safety component of online learning, while appealing to many families for obvious reasons, may also provide a safe space for students to try on socially appropriate identities without the stress of having to be seen at school every day. This is especially interesting considering the distribution of students with disabilities classifications at the school.

One of the most salient points of interest is that out of the thirteen classifications for students with disabilities, three categories: (a) Autism; (b) Specific Learning Disability; and (c) Other Health Impairment, comprise 94.3% of the special education population at the school. This targeted concentration may reveal that students in these three categories fare better in an online setting for a variety of reasons. One potential reason could be that a general lack of appropriate social cueing in prior settings caused students with autism and some of the other classifications to experience difficulty with social interaction in a brick-and-mortar setting.

The literature review reveals that educators in brick-and-mortar settings have concerns about a lack of social connection online, which was echoed by some of the parents in the interviews. For example, Benjamin's main concern about Brin and Brady coming to the school was a lack of opportunity for social interaction. Allison was concerned that while Ashley looked her age physically, her cognitive skills were not mature enough to handle appropriate face-to-face social interaction. However, if the quality of the connectedness is poor from the student's perspective, an online environment could be beneficial, creating a safe haven for students who felt marginalized at best or harmed at worst. The reasons students listed in the literature for wanting to attend online schools included feeling autonomous, feeling safer and being less judged, in addition to having a greater sense of well-being (Beck, Maranto, et al., 2014). The students were happier with their educational setting than the educators who had concerns about the online environment (Beck, Egalite, et al., 2014; Rhim et al., 2008; Rose & Blomeyer, 2007).

While the literature is silent on social activities specifically, there has been a gradual shift from learner outcomes to learner well-being over the past five years as researchers began focusing on student experience not just student outcomes (Beck, Maranto, et al., 2014; Beck, Egalite, et al., 2014; Fernandez et al., 2016; Harvey et al., 2014; Johnston et al., 2014; Rice & Carter, 2015).

Part of the student experience for students with disabilities, especially those with difficulties with social interaction, may include technology-mediated socialization. Some students with disabilities' goals included focusing on socialization and appropriate social interactions with teachers and peers. That may be easier to track and facilitate in an online setting where a teacher can coach the student by role-playing, reviewing transcripts of chats with other teachers for appropriate greetings, identifying patterns of appropriate communication, and areas

of improvement. The online setting may provide students with disabilities the ability to learn and practice specific socialization skills in a low-stakes setting that may transfer to a higher-stakes setting with practice. For example, Cameron shared his experience of feeling like his social confidence had grown tremendously at the school, partially because if he committed a social faux pas, he knew he didn't have to see everyone at school the next day. There would be enough time to recover socially before the next activity.

Additionally, the equalizing ability of technology was an added benefit that may allow students with disabilities to interact with other students without judgment due to their disabilities in a collaborative, technology-mediated classroom setting. The general education students may not be immediately aware of another student's disability, creating an opportunity for students with disabilities to be treated like every other student, and judged on their ideas, rather than by external factors such as appearance or noticeable abnormal social behaviors. Thus, students may be able to build confidence levels in a supportive online setting that can then be practiced at school social activities that can then transfer to non-school social settings.

As students with disabilities continue to seek out online settings for relief from difficult social situations, some are also craving appropriate positive social interaction. As parents of students with disabilities are looking for online settings, one consideration should be the availability of online and in person social interaction. In many online models there are legal considerations that prevent schools from allowing students to interact with each other outside of synchronous teacher-facilitated live learning sessions. When considering an online school for students with disabilities, particularly for those who are interested in improving socialization skills, parents should ask first, whether there is any online student collaboration and second, the

frequency with which it occurs. Parents may also want to ask about in person opportunities for socialization and the frequency with which those opportunities occur as well.

Online schools may also want to work with their legal teams to determine appropriate ways for students to be able to collaborate online in order to practice socialization skills. For some independent study institutions, this may not fit with their model, but for other online schools it may be something worth considering even if they already provide regular face-to-face social opportunities.

The emergent theme of social interaction was somewhat surprising for a study on families' experiences at an online charter school. However, students who struggle with social cueing can practice in low-stakes settings, receive technology-mediated social instruction and feedback, attend activities with less social pressure, and receive judgment for their ideas rather than for their behavior. As such, it becomes clear why online schools that provide social opportunities online and face-to-face would appeal to certain groups of students with disabilities who are craving positive social interactions, especially if they are coming from situations where they experienced negative social interactions previously.

OER-Enabled Pedagogy

OER-Enabled pedagogy is defined as "the set of teaching and learning practices that are only possible or practical in the context of the 5R permissions that are characteristic of OER" (Wiley & Hilton, 2018). The combination of teachers skilled in instructional design using adaptable open educational resource (OER) content creates a nimble, individualized environment that meets the needs of students with disabilities. This could not be achieved with teachers who lacked the ability to design and tier instruction, nor with locked, proprietary content.

The strong connection of students to their teachers is a highlight of both the surveys and the interviews. Students and parents both mentioned teacher assistance and help with class lessons as one of the main reasons for choosing the school.

Multiple students shared their experiences of being able to work with their teachers when they needed help. The students were excited that they didn't have to wait in long lines before or after school to gain access to teacher assistance. Overall, the students enjoyed their teachers and knew that they cared about them. Students mentioned knowing their teachers cared about them because they created meaningful, relevant lessons for them. For example, Cameron was excited about the health class that included a video from a comedian and mentioned this as evidence of his teachers caring about him.

The parents were pleased with patient and persistent teachers who presented information in a variety of ways until their children grasped difficult concepts and could move forward. For example, Allison was happy that Ashley's English teacher was so willing to make suggestions, tier the content, and continue to work with her until she made progress. Parents also recognized the value of having teachers with the ability to adapt the curriculum in order to tier it to meet student needs, like Cassandra who chose to come to the school precisely for that reason. She knew that Cameron could not access grade level content and was frustrated that from her perspective other schools did not have adaptable content. This is especially important when working with students with disabilities. Danielle acknowledged that the teachers held the students to a higher standard and provided them with the supports they needed, in part by having the ability to adjust the content, so students could achieve success.

In the literature, the intersection of online and special education provided an opportunity to leverage technology to customize education and meet student needs in personalized ways.

"Having the ability to modify curriculum and make special adaptations for these learners is just a component that needs to be considered as a best practice, but has potential legal ramifications if schools fail to meet the needs of these learners" (Carnahan & Fulton, 2013, p. 52). Cavanaugh et al. (2004) indicated that the key benefits of online learning included three fundamental elements, one of them being "increased access to resources" (p. 2). Five years later, Barbour and Reeves (2009) reviewed the literature and increased the benefits of online learning to five, including "expanding educational access" (p. 4). One of the advantages of online learning is clear access for all populations; however, it seems to have particular advantage for those with disabilities (Barbour & Reeves, 2009; Cavanaugh et al., 2004). However, it is not without opposition. One roadblock to meeting student needs is proprietary digital content. Kimmons (2016) concluded that "in the realities of work and life, sharing is persistent and expected," (p. 19). Rice and Carter (2015) highlighted the concern of certain online educators of students with disabilities because they are prohibited from accessing proprietary content to be able to adapt or modify it to meet student needs as required by law. However, "openness empowers teachers to take a much more active role in the selection and vetting of content" (Kimmons, 2016, p.19). Furthermore, if an online school is able to design its own content using OER, it mitigates the effects of using proprietary content that is unable to be adapted. In that case, the elements of how to design the content become critical. Keeler and Horney (2007) explored how deliberate instructional design can augment the learning experience of students with disabilities in an online setting by focusing on principles of universal design. In order for teachers to best assist students online, we need more professional development focusing on students with disabilities. Rice and Dawley (2009) called for additional educator training for online teachers especially for working with students with disabilities through university training programs.

Based on the results of the parent and student surveys and interviews, in addition to the existing literature, there are several recommendations that may enhance the online learning experience for students with disabilities: (a) default open policies for content created with shared taxpayer dollars; (b) university training programs that teach about OER as an intervention and incorporate instructional design skills; and (c) professional development programs for online teachers.

Customization of OER content provides the ability for instructional designers and teachers to appropriately tier curriculum, while providing least restrictive environment (LRE) provisions and meeting legal requirements to make appropriate modifications to content. Pay sites like Teachers pay Teachers that generate content teachers can use to supplement existing lesson plans seem to be a much-needed companion piece to existing materials based on its popularity. In addition to cheaper, for pay content, there are a myriad of no cost OER sites and content available that provide an answer to busy teachers needing tiered content for their general education curriculum. Currently, the federal government has a policy that "requires by default that recipients of competitive grants apply an open license and have a plan to publicly disseminate educational resources and other works created with grant funds" (2 CFR § 3474.20). States should follow suit with statutes that at a minimum insist on open licensing of all state grant funded projects. Additionally, state legislatures should create policies like Utah's that allow districts to opt for OER licensing of district employee created content if they so choose (Utah Adm. R. 277-120-5(4)(a)). Open policies accelerate access and innovation. While districts in Utah have the option of allowing their teachers to create and publish their self-created materials as OER, most districts continue to thwart teachers' ability to share their content with others by enacting stringent policies that state that materials created as a district employee belong to the

district. Districts should remove barriers to implementation of OER by allowing teachers to creative commons license their own materials in addition to encouraging them to find and use existing OER, especially those that would be beneficial for students with disabilities. Removing this constraint would allow one teacher created artifact to potentially impact hundreds of thousands of students rather than just those living within their district boundaries or sitting in that teacher's classroom. There is also a moral obligation to share with the greatest number of teachers and students who can be impacted for the better, especially since the districts and LEAs have nothing to lose and so much to gain. Increased access to OER can provide a potential real-time solution for special education and general education teachers as an intervention for students with disabilities.

In addition to policy changes, university training programs also have an opportunity to enhance the instructional design course offerings, and to ensure that OER and some of the OER repositories are included as options. By doing so, future teachers will already be familiar with them prior to becoming teachers. Future special educators would be well-served by knowing where to access leveled content that is an OER.

Lastly, professional online learning associations and teachers of special educator associations may want to look to ongoing professional development programs for online teachers of students with disabilities. They could leverage strong special interest groups within their associations to provide forums for collaborative professional development to take place both organically and at organized conferences. Superintendents and school leaders can do their part by prioritizing conference attendance for their teachers of students with disabilities so they can keep their skills sharp and have opportunities to stay abreast of the latest trends in instructional design, OER, digital repositories, interventions and accommodations, and the intersection of online and

special education. Both general education and teachers of students with disabilities should also be prepared to lend their voices as presenters of best practices at conferences, as research partners as appropriate with institutions of higher learning, and as co-authors on papers so their practitioner voices are balanced with those of state level directors.

In conclusion, teachers who can nimbly modify and make accommodations to OER curriculum for students with disabilities elegantly and efficiently fulfill the promise of IDEIA and truly provide equitable access to education the way it was intended.

Self-Determination

Self-determination within the learning environment, defined as when, where, and how the student is learning, emerged as one of the most significant themes from the student and parent surveys.

Students loved being able to choose when to work because it gave them “more time to think,” or they could work late if they were “a night owl.” Many parents used the phrase, “being able to work on his own time” to describe the flexibility their students had to do their schoolwork when they wanted.

Both parents and students also enjoyed choosing where to do school. The students did not have to deal with bullies any longer and the parents felt more peaceful with their teens learning at home. The students also liked the reduced distractions and the quieter environment so they could concentrate on their schoolwork.

Parents and students especially like choosing how to do school as well. Students liked that it was online because they no longer lost assignments and they could work at their own pace. Some days students would work considerably and some days they could take a break if needed.

Parents liked the life skills the students were learning and that they could monitor student progress better online.

The overarching theme that ties the learning environment together is self-determination because the parents and students get to choose when, where, and how to do school. Students and parents both shared stories of finding success through autonomy and self-determination. Drake's mom, Danielle, had to let him falter a little bit until he realized he could be in charge of his learning. He implemented a schedule that was very similar to the schedule created by his mother, the difference being that he chose it himself. That self-determination helped him move from all Ds to all As in one term. Cameron had a similar experience, struggling through the first year at the school until he figured out how to navigate the online environment. He discovered that he could decide whether or not he was going to be successful by asking teachers for help and taking charge of his learning. Benjamin shared his happiness upon learning that his children would be able to graduate by working hard. Finally, Allison discussed being excited that Ashley had opportunities to determine her own path on her own time frame. The power of self-determination as a theme is woven throughout the surveys and the interviews for both parents and students.

The literature reveals that surveyed students craved more autonomy as one of the factors that contributed to a greater sense of well-being (Beck, Maranto et al., 2014), but other than that, self-determination is not a theme that intersects with the online special education literature and warrants further scrutiny, perhaps through the lens of the work that Reeve (2002) has done on self-determination theory applied to educational settings.

However, there is ample literature on the learning environment. Burdette et al. (2012) surveyed state special education directors from 18 states and discovered that online learning environments that removed time constraints can also provide embedded accommodations for

students with disabilities in terms of flexibility and customization which were, in fact, some of the main reasons students chose online learning. Those survey results echoed the results of the student and parent surveys at this school as well.

Simply having a choice does not always predict better results, however, as revealed in a longitudinal study by Allday and Allday (2011). Students chose a traditional, extended, or accelerated course design, meaning they chose the pace at which they moved through the class. Those who selected the traditional and accelerated rates performed better than the students who chose the extended track, indicating that extended time may not be the best accommodation, especially for an entire course. This suggests that pacing is important and that traditional deadlines should be considered rather than large chunks of time with a single deadline at the end.

The idea of self-determination, flexibility, and customization makes sense against the backdrop of Christensen's predictions over the past decade. His initial claim that 50% of all 9-12 grade high school courses would be delivered online by 2019 (Christensen et al., 2008) was modified by Horn and Staker (2011) to include blended options within a brick-and-mortar setting. Christensen et al. (2013) further adjusted the prediction in 2013 by stating that a la carte and FLEX online courses would be the most sustainable. This reveals that students enjoyed autonomy and being able to choose when, where, and how they learn. The combination of being able to go to a brick-and-mortar some days and work from home others is appealing, as evidenced by the nationwide trend of blended and FLEX courses. This concept is further supported in the most recent Keeping Pace Report which indicates that part-time enrollments continue to increase (Gemin & Pape, 2017). Students of all types, whether they are general education students or students with disabilities, like being able to mix and match their courses and determine when, where and how they learn.

Over the past decade, the underlying philosophy of special education in brick-and-mortar settings has shifted from pull-out programs, where students with disabilities are removed from the general education setting and provided with individual instruction while missing classroom instruction, to an inclusion model, where the students are included in the general education classroom setting as much as possible, however, they may miss portions of instruction if the teacher moves too quickly. While pedagogy is always evolving and collaborative groups, such as paraprofessionals working with students with disabilities during the class, and other learning strategies in a brick-and-mortar classroom are helpful, letting students choose what to work on and at which pace (traditional or accelerated) in a blended environment could yield beneficial results. Teachers could track individual student progress that would be helpful to all students, not just to those with disabilities. Many schools are focusing on one-to-one devices but even that may not be necessary if a teacher can secure enough devices for a tech station to use in rotations. Self-determination matters because giving students the ability to choose portions of how they learn may improve student well-being and potentially help students achieve success as they take ownership of their learning.

As educators leverage technology's promise to improve education, one potential answer seems to have been right in front of us all along. Every student should have equitable access to an individualized education program, not under the legal constraints IDEIA, but in the sense that each student should be able to choose for themselves elements of their learning in order to customize a pathway specific to their needs so they have the greatest chance for success.

Future Research

Researchers have been issuing a direct call to determine the quality of the learning experience for low-performing students in online-learning settings for the past decade

(Cavanaugh et al., 2009; Ferdig & Kennedy, 2018; Vasquez & Serianni, 2012). While there has been a slight increase in the body of research, there remain critical gaps to be filled starting with how many students are taking which types of online classes in each state. Some concrete questions for future studies might include:

- How many students are taking online classes in which settings: statewide schools, online public charters schools or programs, and online districts schools or programs?
- What is the nationwide prevalence of students with disabilities by classification in each of these online settings?

Additionally, more research is warranted for each of the following themes, as is additional qualitative research to gather personal experiences of students with disabilities and their parents: (a) mattering; (b) social safety and connection; (c) OER-enabled pedagogy; and (d) self-determination.

Mattering. In this study, I found that students' sense of mattering in their previous learning experiences was poor, therefore students were seeking a safe haven in an online setting precisely because they wanted to know that they mattered. Future research should explore whether students with disabilities who stay in brick-and-mortar settings experience overall well-being at the same levels as their general education peers, as well as general education peers in online settings. Explicit research on parent well-being and mattering should be explored as a companion piece to the studies on student well-being.

Social safety and connection. In this study, I found that students knew they were different from their classmates and they wanted to escape negative social interactions. They also craved positive social connection. Future research should explore what the social safety and

connection landscape of online schools in the United States looks like in terms of face-to-face activities, opportunities for virtual collaboration with teachers, and virtual connection with peers. It should also explore how students might be experiencing social safety and connection differently in online settings versus brick-and-mortar settings.

OER-enabled pedagogy. Some teachers, schools, and districts provide access to personalizable, editable, non-proprietary content that can be shared within the educational community and allow teachers to work collaboratively to customize and revise the content for various groups of students (Velasquez et al., 2013). However, many online schools use proprietary content from a single national source that is difficult to customize for each state's standards, let alone modify for students with disabilities. Even with skilled teachers in place who could adapt content if they were allowed to, accommodating students becomes extremely difficult due to technical constraints of not being able to access content directly. Future research should explore policy changes at the national and state levels to facilitate OER-enabled pedagogies to benefit students with disabilities and empower teachers to best serve them, such as assurances that online content must (a) meet individual state standards not just a national core, (b) be accessible to adaptation by general education and special education teachers or, at the very least, by an instructional designer, and (c) curriculum adoption schedules that include a review of OER as an option.

Self-determination. Parents and students appreciated choosing when, where, and how to learn. The idea of self-determination in brick-and-mortar education settings was initially explored by Reeve (2002), but future research that connects their ideas to this area of study online might include some of the following research questions:

- How can self-determination theory be applied in an online setting?

- What are the effects of choosing when and how to learn on student well-being?
- What are the effects of choosing when and how students learn on student outcomes?

Those who pursue these research questions should carefully consider that much of the past research has focused on student outcomes and should instead, or in addition to, focus on student well-being. Furthermore, there has been a direct call for more qualitative studies to add context to the quantitative research that exists, so future research should consider additional phenomenological interview studies to fill that particular need. Overall, any additional research will be a welcome addition to an emerging area of study.

CHAPTER 6

Conclusion

One online charter school's special education population's growth outpaced the growth of the rest of its students over the past eight years. In 2016, the students with disabilities population was 15.0% of all students ("UTREx," 2016) which is higher than the state average of 11% and 12% ("National Center for Education Statistics," 2017). Even more interesting was that 94.3% of the students with disabilities were concentrated into three of the 13 classifications for students with disabilities: (a) Autism (AU), (b) Other Health Impairment (OHI), and (c) Specific Learning Disability (SLD). This information warranted additional exploration into why parents and students left a traditional educational setting to enroll in an online school.

In order to determine how much research had already been done, I surveyed the literature from 2000 to 2016 looking for articles that focused on online special education implementation along with student outcomes and experiences. I also reviewed the current federal special education legal structure and looked for information on special education statute in online settings. I reviewed and synthesized the existing literature, which revealed gaps in four areas: the content, the teacher, the learner, and the law. The largest gaps in the literature existed in the following four areas: (a) equitable access to content, (b) professional development for teachers, (c) student well-being and satisfaction, and (d) law and policy updates. Since I was interested in the student experience, I focused my research on student well-being for students with disabilities in an online setting and asked these research questions: "What were the motives for and experiences of special education families and students who were attending Mountain Heights Academy?" In other words, why did they choose this school and what happened once they enrolled?

I surveyed the students and their parents to find common reasons for selecting this school. The quantitative responses provided a general overview of why families chose to enroll but the themes from the short answer responses provided more in-depth information. The synthesis of their responses revealed two common themes: (a) learning environment and (b) student experience. Parents and students chose the school for a different, safer learning experience because they liked deciding when, where, and how to learn. They also chose to leave their prior setting due to a variety of personal and academic reasons, but mainly because their needs were not being met and they felt that their concerns were not being appropriately addressed. In short, they wanted something better for their students.

With these data from the survey results, I then examined the lived experiences of four families of students with disabilities through in-depth, semi-structured interviews. I wanted to understand the story of how and why these families chose online learning and this particular school in addition to what their experience has been since they started. I first grouped the responses into macro-themes, which were then refined by "lumping and splitting" (Salda a, 2009, pp. 19-20) into micro-themes. I did this with the assistance of two third-party educational experts with backgrounds in education, administration, special education, and experience in online education. The critical themes from the results of the interviews were (a) mattering, (b) social safety and connection, (c) OER-enabled pedagogy, and (d) self-determination.

Students chose to come to the school, because they generally had poor experiences in a prior setting where they and their parents did not feel that they mattered to the staff. They found a different, more welcoming environment at this school both academically and socially. The culture of mattering was communicated from the enrollment process, to the onboarding process,

to the teacher interaction, to the IEP process as well. Students and parents felt that they mattered to everyone involved in the school, and "mattering is motivating," as one participant stated.

Social safety may have been difficult in prior settings also, but it was a highlight for each of the students who were interviewed, because they could try out a variety of social situations in a low-stakes setting that could then transfer to a higher-stakes setting with little risk. The key element for this theme is that while students wanted to remove themselves from negative social settings, they were also desperately seeking positive social connection; they found opportunities to do so at this school.

Furthermore, OER-enabled pedagogy was a distinctive feature of this school that likely set it apart from other online schools and brick-and-mortar schools. This was important because students and parents felt that their needs were being met in ways they had not before experienced. This experience resulted because of the OER content that was easily adaptable by skilled teachers with experience in instructional design. This particular combination lent itself well to providing real time accommodations and modifications to students with disabilities and fulfilled legal requirements to provide students with access to general education curriculum that was also tiered to meet their particular needs.

Finally, students especially enjoyed deciding for themselves when, where, and how to learn. Self-determination and taking charge of the learning environment empowered students to experience modest academic success. Families appreciated being able to choose the location of their schooling for the day. They also enjoyed being able to work in between doctor appointments and to fit school in around life rather than the opposite. Students also valued being able to decide when to work. This self-determination catered to students having the ability to pace themselves to work throughout the day and throughout the week on their own time. Lastly,

the students enjoyed choosing to work online on a laptop that included a learning management system that kept track of their schoolwork. This system worked better for these students because the work was not done on pieces of paper and lost in lockers and backpacks. In addition, they valued tracking their performance better as well. The parents appreciated the up-to-date student performance feature too because they knew how their students were doing in real time. Overall, determining when, where, and how to do school was a major factor in choosing to attend Mountain Heights Academy.

Families chose to come to this school for a variety of reasons, but mainly because parents were looking for a different option where they felt that they mattered, that provided opportunities for social safety and connection, that met student needs through teachers, curriculum, and OER-enabled pedagogy, and that empowered them to choose when, where, and how to learn.

Historically, the arguments in support of online learning have centered around (a) access, (b) bandwidth, (c) technology, (d) efficiency, (e) cost-effectiveness, and (f) economies of scale. Part of the allure of online learning in general, and one of its greatest affordances, can be captured in two words: equitable access (Hassel et al., 2001). Virtual learning has the capacity to bring educational opportunities to every student who has an internet connection, which highlights concerns about bandwidth and appropriate technological accommodations for K-12 students. The advent of massive online open courses (MOOC) in the late 2000s at the university level leveraged the expertise of professors and touted the ability to share knowledge with greater numbers of students than physically possible in the four walls of a classroom (Daniel, 2012). This perceived efficiency manifested itself in K-12 online education as well, with for-profit educational management organization (EMO) schools leveraging technology to have one teacher manage three times the national average of students per teacher in an effort to drive down costs

and focus on scaling (Miron & Gulosino, 2016). The drivers of these arguments are generally not student well-being as explored in this study (e.g., mattering, social safety and connection).

Thus, as we take a closer look at the types of online models available and rethink future opportunities, the focus should include student well-being and the provision of a safe learning environment, social connections, content that is adaptable to meet learner needs, and student choice on when, where, and how to learn, and not strictly revolve around increasing access, leveraging bandwidth and technology, facilitating efficiency, driving down costs, or scaling. We have not only an opportunity but a responsibility to leverage emerging technologies to provide online models that place the student more deeply at the center of the education equation.

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APPENDIX A

Parent Survey Cover Letter

Mountain Heights Academy Parent Experience Survey 2017-2018

Dear Parent,

As a parent at Mountain Heights Academy you know how our school works.

I am surveying a group of parents whose students have been at the school for at least one year. Your answers to this short survey will help me understand your experiences and why you chose to come to our school. There are 13 questions total; eight questions about why you came to this school and five questions about you.

Taking the survey is optional. A third party will review the survey responses and assign a number to each respondent in order to keep your answers confidential.

The use of the data gathered in this survey will be limited to this project as authorized by Brigham Young University and the Mountain Heights Academy Board of Directors, although it may also be used in publications and conference presentations. Quotes from the short answers on the survey may be used as examples but since this survey is confidential and I am not collecting names, neither you nor your student will be named in any publication or presentation. Examples of publications include journal articles about online students with disabilities or presentations at education conferences.

If you have questions or concerns, call me at the number below, or contact the Mountain Heights Academy Board of Directors at mhaboard@mountainheightsacademy.org, or my dissertation chair, Dr. Royce Kimmons at roycekimmons@byu.edu.

Thank you for taking this survey. I genuinely appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

DeLaina Tonks, PhD student, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84606
Principal, Mountain Heights Academy, dtonks@mountainheightsacademy.org, 801.725.3396

APPENDIX B

Survey: Implied Consent for Parents

Mountain Heights Academy Parent Experience Survey 2017-2018

Dear Parent,

My name is DeLaina Tonks and I am a graduate student at Brigham Young University and I am conducting this research under the supervision of Professor Royce Kimmons, from the Department of Instructional Psychology and Technology. You are being invited to participate in this research study of A Mixed Methods Study of Families' Experiences at an Online Charter School.

As a parent at Mountain Heights Academy you know how our school works. I am surveying a group of parents whose students have been at the school for at least one year. Your answers to this short survey will help me understand your experiences and why you chose to come to our school. There are 13 questions total; eight questions about why you came to this school and five questions about you.

Your participation in this study will require the completion of the linked survey. This should take approximately 10-15 minutes of your time depending on how much information you share in the short answer questions. Your participation will be anonymous and you will not be contacted again in the future. You will not be paid for being in this study. This survey involves minimal risk to you. The benefits, however, may impact society by helping increase knowledge about why particular families choose online education.

The use of the data gathered in this survey will be limited to this project as authorized by Brigham Young University and the Mountain Heights Academy Board of Directors, although it may also be used in publications and conference presentations.

You do not have to be in this study if you do not want to be. You do not have to answer any question that you do not want to answer for any reason. We will be happy to answer any questions you have about this study. If you have further questions about this project or if you have a research-related problem you may contact me, at the number below, or contact the Mountain Heights Academy Board of Directors at mhaboard@mountainheightsacademy.org, or my dissertation chair, Dr. Royce Kimmons at roycekimmons@byu.edu.

If you have any questions about your rights as a research participant you may contact the IRB Administrator at A-285 ASB, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84602; irb@byu.edu;

(801) 422-1461. The IRB is a group of people who review research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research participants.

The completion of this survey implies your consent to participate. If you choose to participate, please complete the attached survey by (insert date). Thank you!

Thank you for taking this survey. I genuinely appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

DeLaina Tonks
PhD student
Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84606
Principal
Mountain Heights Academy
dtonks@mountainheightsacademy.org
801.725.3396

APPENDIX C

Parent Survey

Section 1: Please answer the question below with as much detail as possible.

What is the main reason you decided to have your student attend Mountain Heights Academy?

Section 2: Why did you choose to come to Mountain Heights Academy?

Step 1: Think back to how you felt as you were looking at different schools and answer the questions based on your feelings at that time.

Step 2: Each question has four options:

o Strongly Agree

o Agree

o Disagree

o Strongly Disagree

Click the circle beneath the statement that best describes your feelings about the experience.

Step 3: Please tell me more about your personal experience with each question below. Be specific and provide details.

Question 1: Flexibility

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to attend Mountain Heights because of the flexible schedule.	○	○	○	○

If you answered Strongly Agree or Agree, how is Mountain Heights Academy flexible for you?

Question 2: Online

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to attend Mountain Heights because it is online.	○	○	○	○

Does online learning work for you? Why or why not?

Question 3: Teachers

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to attend Mountain Heights because the teachers are available to help them.	○	○	○	○

Describe your student's experience with teacher availability.

Question 4: Curriculum (class lessons)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to attend Mountain Heights Academy because of the class lessons (What is taught in the classes.)	○	○	○	○

Describe your experience with your student's class lessons.

Question 5: Students as Decision-makers

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to have my student attend Mountain Heights because my student wanted to come here.	○	○	○	○

If you answered Strongly Agree or Agree, how did you feel about your student deciding to come to Mountain Heights Academy?

Question 6: Our previous school was not a good fit.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to attend Mountain Heights Academy because our previous school was not a good fit.	○	○	○	○

If you answered Strongly Agree or Agree, why was your previous school not a good fit?

Question 7: Laptop

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to have my student attend Mountain Heights because they got a laptop to use.	○	○	○	○

How do you feel about your student having a laptop at Mountain Heights Academy?

Section 3: Demographics

To put your answers in context, I would like to gather some information about you. Your answers will be kept confidential and will be de-identified when reporting results.

Question 1: What is your gender

Question 2: What is your age range?

○ 25-35

○ 36-45

○ 46-55

○ 56-65

○ 66-75

Question 3: What is your race/ethnicity?

○ American Indian or Alaska Native. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.

○ Asian. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.

○ Black or African American. A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. Terms such as "Haitian" or "Negro" can be used in addition to "Black or African American."

○ Hispanic or Latino. A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race. The term, "Spanish origin," can be used in addition to "Hispanic or Latino."

○ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.

o White. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.

Question 4: What grade was your student in when they started school at Mountain Heights Academy?

o 7th

o 8th

o 9th

o 10th

o 11th

o 12th

Question 5: During which quarter did your student start attending at Mountain Heights Academy?

○ Quarter 1 (August/September)

○ Quarter 2 (November)

○ Quarter 3 (January)

○ Quarter 4 (March)

Thank you for taking your time to complete this survey. The responses will be used to improve student experiences in the future. I appreciate your participation.

DeLaina Tonks
PhD student, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84606
Principal, Mountain Heights Academy, dtonks@mountainheightsacademy.org, 801.725.3396

APPENDIX D

Student Survey Cover Letter

Mountain Heights Academy Student Experience Survey 2017-2018

Dear Student,

As a student at Mountain Heights Academy you know how our school works.

I am surveying a group of students who have been at the school for at least one year. Your answers to this short survey will help me understand your experiences and why you chose to come to our school. There are 13 questions total; eight questions about why you came to this school and five questions about you.

Taking the survey is optional, meaning you get to decide if you want to take it or not. I will not collect your name in order to keep your answers confidential, meaning I will not know which survey belongs to which student.

The answers from this survey will only be used for my research in my doctorate program in a way that Brigham Young University and the Mountain Heights Academy Board of Directors is comfortable with. Quotes from the short answers on the survey may be used as examples but the survey is confidential so you will not be named in any publication or presentation. Examples of publications include journal articles about online students with disabilities or presentations at education conferences.

If you have questions or concerns, call me at the number below, or contact the Mountain Heights Academy Board of Directors at mhaboard@mountainheightsacademy.org, or my dissertation chair, Dr. Royce Kimmons at roycekimmons@byu.edu.

Thank you for taking this survey. I genuinely appreciate your time.

Sincerely,

DeLaina Tonks, PhD student, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84606
Principal, Mountain Heights Academy, dtonks@mountainheightsacademy.org
801.725.3396

APPENDIX E

Survey: Parental Permission Form for a Minor

Introduction

My name is DeLaina Tonks and I am a graduate student from Brigham Young University and I'm also the principal at Mountain Heights. I am conducting a research study about why students with disabilities and parents choose to come to Mountain Heights Academy and what your experience is like once you are here. I am inviting your child to take part in the research because he/she is a student who has attended Mountain Heights Academy for at least one year.

Procedures

If you agree to let your child participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- I will email a survey to your student
- The survey will be anonymous, meaning data is not collected showing who the student is
- The survey includes questions about how they decided to come to this school and what they like
  about their experience here
- The survey will take between 12 and 20 minutes

Risks

We think there are few risks to your child by being in the study, but they don't have to answer any of the questions they don't want to answer and participation is optional.

Confidentiality

The researcher will also keep all data in a password protected file on a laptop that is also password protected. Only the researcher will have access to the data. At the end of the study, data will be kept on file for three years and then deleted.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits for your child's participation in this project.

Questions about the Research

Please direct any further questions about the study to DeLaina Tonks at 801.725.3396 or delainatonks@gmail.com. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Royce Kimmons, at 801.422.7072 or roycekimmons@byu.edu

Questions about your child's rights as a study participant or to submit comment or complaints about the study should be directed to the IRB Administrator, Brigham Young University, A-285 ASB, Provo, UT 84602. Call (801) 422-1461 or send emails to irb@byu.edu.

Participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You are free to decline to have your child participate in this research study. You may withdraw your child's participation at any point without affecting your child's grades, treatment, or standing at Mountain Heights Academy.

You have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

Child's Name:

Parent Name (Printed): Signature: Date:

APPENDIX F

Survey: Child Assent (Ages 7-14)

What is this research about?

My name is DeLaina Tonks, and I am a student at Brigham Young University. I'm also your principal. I want to tell you about a research study I am doing. A research study is a special way to find the answers to questions. We are trying to learn more about why students choose to come to Mountain Heights Academy and what their experience is like once they start. Your parents know we are talking with you about this study. You are being asked to join the study because you have been a student at Mountain Heights Academy for at least one year.

If you decide you want to be in this study, this is what will happen:

1. You will receive an email with a link to a survey. It will take you 12 to 20 minutes to finish.
2. You click on the link
3. You will see a letter where I explain what I am researching
4. You will be asked to answer 13 questions total, eight questions about:
    - why you decided to come to this school,
    - what your other school was like
    - what made you want to change to online school,
    - what is working well at this school
    -what is not working well for you here.
5. You will also be asked to answer five questions about your gender, ethnicity, grade level, and when you started attending this school.

6. When you are done, you will click the submit button. This sends the answers to me but it does not tell me who you are.

Can anything bad happen to me?
You may not want to answer questions. You may choose to not answer any of the questions at any time.

You may be uncomfortable telling me if you don't like something about the school because I am the principal. There is no way for me to know who submits a survey or who doesn't, or to know how you answered the questions.

Can anything good happen to me?
We don't know if being in this study will help you. But we hope to learn something that will help other people someday.

Do I have other choices?
You can choose not to be in this study.

Will anyone know I am in the study?
We won't tell anyone you took part in this study. When we are done with the study, we will write a report about what we learned. Since the survey is anonymous, meaning we won't know whose answers belong to whom, your name will not be included anywhere.

What if I do not want to do this?
If you want to be in this study, please sign and print your name below.

If you want to be in this study, please sign and print your name below.

Name (Printed): Signature Date:

APPENDIX G

Survey: Youth Assent (15-17 years old)

What is this study about?

_____My name is DeLaina Tonks, and I am a student at Brigham Young University. I'm also your principal. I want to tell you about a research study I am doing. Your parents know we are talking with you about this study. This form will tell you about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to be in it. In this study we are trying to learn more about why students choose to come to Mountain Heights Academy and what their experience is like once they start. You are being asked to join the study because you have been a student at Mountain Heights Academy for at least one year.

What am I being asked to do?

If you decide you want to be in this study, this is what will happen:

1. You will receive an email with a link to a survey. It will take you 12 to 20 minutes to finish.
2. You click on the link
3. You will see a letter where I explain what I am researching
4. You will be asked to answer 13 questions total, eight questions about:
    - why you decided to come to this school,
    - what your other school was like
    - what made you want to change to online school,
    - what is working well at this school
    -what is not working well for you here.
5. You will also be asked to answer five questions about your gender, ethnicity, grade level, and when you started attending this school.
6. When you are done, you will click the submit button. This sends the answers to me but it does not tell me who you are.

What are the benefits to me for taking part in this study?

We don't know if being in this study will help you. But we hope to learn something that will help other people someday.

Can anything bad happen to me?

You may not want to answer questions. You may choose to not answer any of the questions at any time.

You may be uncomfortable telling me if you don't like something about the school because I am the principal. However, there is no way for me to know who submits a survey or who doesn't, or to know how you answered the questions.

Who will know I am in the study?

We won't tell anybody that you are in this study. When we are done with the study, we will write a report about what we learned. Since the survey is anonymous, meaning we won't know whose answers belong to whom, your name will not be included anywhere. When we tell other people or write articles about what we learned in the study, we won't include your name or that of anyone else who took part in the study.

Do I have to be in the study?

No, you don't. The choice is up to you. No one will get angry or upset if you don't want to do this. You can change your mind anytime if you decide you don't want to be in the study anymore. All you have to do is tell us.

What if I have questions?

If you have questions at any time, you can ask us and you can talk to your parents about the study. We will give you a copy of this form to keep. If you want to ask us questions about the study, contact Mrs. DeLaina Tonks at 801.725.3396 or delainatonks@gmail.com.

If you want to be in this study, please sign and print your name below.

Name (Printed): Signature Date:

APPENDIX H

Student Survey

Section 1: Please answer the question below with as much detail as possible.

What is the main reason you decided to attend Mountain Heights Academy?

Section 2: Why did you choose to come to Mountain Heights Academy?

Step 1: Think back to how you felt as you were looking at different schools and answer the questions based on your feelings at that time.

Step 2: Each question has four options:

o Strongly Agree
o Agree
o Disagree
o Strongly Disagree

Click the circle beneath the statement that best describes your feelings about the experience.

Step 3: Please tell me more about your personal experience with each question below. Be specific and provide details.

Question 1: Flexibility

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to attend Mountain Heights because of the flexible schedule.	○	○	○	○

If you answered Strongly Agree or Agree, how is Mountain Heights Academy flexible for you?

Question 2: Online

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to attend Mountain Heights because it is online.	○	○	○	○

Does online learning work for you? Why or why not?

Question 3: Teachers

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to attend Mountain Heights because the teachers are available to help me.	○	○	○	○

Describe your experience with teacher availability.

Question 4: Curriculum (class lessons)

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to attend Mountain Heights Academy because of the class lessons (What is taught in the classes.)	○	○	○	○

Describe your experience with the class lessons.

Question 5: Parents as Decision-makers

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to attend Mountain Heights because my parents made me.	○	○	○	○

If you answered Strongly Agree or Agree, how did you feel about your parents making the decision for you to come to Mountain Heights Academy?

Question 6: My previous school was not a good fit.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to attend Mountain Heights Academy because my previous school was not a good fit.	○	○	○	○

If you answered Strongly Agree or Agree, why was your previous school not a good fit?

Question 7: Laptop

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
I chose to attend Mountain Heights because I got a laptop to use.	○	○	○	○

How do you feel about having a laptop at Mountain Heights Academy?

Section 3: Demographics

To put your answers in context, I would like to gather some information about you. Your answers will be kept confidential and will be de-identified when reporting results.

Question 1: What is your gender

Question 2: What is your race/ethnicity?

○ American Indian or Alaska Native. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of North and South America (including Central America), and who maintains tribal affiliation or community attachment.

○ Asian. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of the Far East, Southeast Asia, or the Indian subcontinent including, for example, Cambodia, China, India, Japan, Korea, Malaysia, Pakistan, the Philippine Islands, Thailand, and Vietnam.

○ Black or African American. A person having origins in any of the black racial groups of Africa. Terms such as "Haitian" or "Negro" can be used in addition to "Black or African American."

○ Hispanic or Latino. A person of Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican, Cuban, South or Central American, or other Spanish culture or origin, regardless of race. The term, "Spanish origin," can be used in addition to "Hispanic or Latino."

○ Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Hawaii, Guam, Samoa, or other Pacific Islands.

○ White. A person having origins in any of the original peoples of Europe, the Middle East, or North Africa.

Question 3: What grade are you in this year?

○ 8th

○ 9th

○ 10th

○ 11th

○ 12th

○ 12+

Question 4: What grade were you in when you started school at Mountain Heights Academy?

○ 7th

○ 8th

○ 9th

○ 10th

○ 11th

○ 12th

Question 5: During which quarter did you start school at Mountain Heights Academy?

○ Quarter 1 (August/September)

○ Quarter 2 (November)

○ Quarter 3 (January)

○ Quarter 4 (March)

Thank you for taking your time to complete this survey. The responses will be used to improve student experiences in the future. I appreciate your participation.

DeLaina Tonks
PhD student, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT 84606
Principal, Mountain Heights Academy, dtonks@mountainheightsacademy.org, 801.725.3396

APPENDIX I

Parent Cover Letter—Interviews

Dear Parent,

As a parent at Mountain Heights Academy you have great insight into how our school works. Your willingness to be interviewed will help me understand your experiences and why you chose to send your student to our school.

I will be interviewing a group of students and one of their parents who have been at the school for at least one year. I am conducting this research to find out why you chose online education and to learn more about your and your student's experiences here. This interview will take between 45 and 60 minutes to complete depending on how much time you spend answering each question.

As I transcribe your answers there will be follow up communication via email or phone to ensure that I am interpreting your answers correctly. You will be able to review the information to make sure it is accurate.

Your participation in the interview is voluntary. Your answers will be protected by changing the names and limiting identifying information about you or your child. The use of the data gathered in this survey will be limited to this project as authorized by Brigham Young University and the Mountain Heights Academy Board of Directors, although it may also be used in publications and conference presentations.

Thank you for your interest in participating in this interview. I genuinely appreciate your time and effort. To thank you for your time each participant will receive a $25 gift card and you, as the parent, will receive a check for mileage reimbursement at $0.53 per mile at the conclusion of the interview.

If you have questions or concerns, you may contact me at the number below, the Mountain Heights Academy Board of Directors, or my dissertation chair, Dr. Royce Kimmons at 801.422.7072 or roycekimmons@byu.edu.

Sincerely,

DeLaina Tonks

PhD Candidate
Brigham Young University
delainatonks@gmail.com
Principal, Mountain Heights Academy
dtonks@mountainheightsacademy.org
801.725.3396

APPENDIX J

Interview: Adult Consent to be a Research Subject

Introduction

My name is DeLaina Tonks and I am a graduate student from Brigham Young University. I am conducting a research study about why particular students and parents choose to come to Mountain Heights Academy and what your experience is like once you are here. I am inviting you to take part in the research because you are a parent of or a student who has attended Mountain Heights Academy for at least one year.

Procedures

If you agree to participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- I will interview you
- I will audio record the interview in order to transcribe it accurately
- I will ask questions about how you decided to come to this school and what you like/don't like about your experience here
- The interview will take between 45 and 60 minutes
- I will contact you for a follow up review of my interpretation of your answers to ensure accuracy. This should take no more than 45 and 60 minutes.
- I will schedule a convenient interview time with you in advance.
- The interviews will take place at the West Jordan office located at: 9067 S. 1300 W. Suite 204 West Jordan, UT 84088.
- After our conversation is transcribed, I will write out my understanding of it. I will send you a copy of it by email for review. If something doesn't sound right or didn't come across the way you meant it to, you can let me know and I will change it.

Risks

We think there are few risks by being in the study, but some people might become uncomfortable because of some of the questions we ask. You don't have to answer any of the questions you don't want to answer.

You may be uncomfortable telling me if you don't like something about the school because I am the principal. Your (or your student's) grades cannot be changed based on what you say, and enrollment at the school will not be at risk regardless of your answers. There will not be any negative side effects at the school from sharing your personal experience whether it is positive or negative.

You might get bored, tired, or hungry. You can take a break anytime and we will have snacks and drinks available for you. There may be a risk of loss of privacy, which the researcher will reduce by not using any real names or other identifiers in the written report.

Benefits

There will be no direct benefits to you. It is hoped, however, that through your participation researchers may learn about why families choose online education and about their experiences at this particular school.

Confidentiality

The researcher will also keep all data in a password protected file on a laptop that is also password protected. Only the researcher and the transcriptionist will have access to the voice recorded data. Once your comments have been transcribed, several researchers and educational experts will be reviewing it to find common themes. Anonymity will be maintained by assigning a pseudonym (fake name) to each interview participant so that your answers will not be linked to you. At the end of the study, data will be kept on file for three years and then deleted.

Compensation

Each participant will receive a $25 gift card for participating. The parent will receive a mileage reimbursement of $0.53 per mile.

Participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You are free to decline to participate in this research study. You may withdraw your participation at any point without affecting your child's grades, treatment, or standing at Mountain Heights Academy.

Questions about the Research

Please direct any further questions about the study to DeLaina Tonks at 801.725.3396 or delainatonks@gmail.com. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Royce Kimmons, at 801.422.7072 or roycekimmons@byu.edu

Questions about your rights as a study participant or to submit comment or complaints about the study should be directed to the IRB Administrator, Brigham Young University, A-285 ASB, Provo, UT 84602. Call (801) 422-1461 or send emails to irb@byu.edu.

Statement of Consent

I have read, understood, and received a copy of the above consent and desire of my own free will to participate in this study.

If you want to be in this study, please check the box below on whether or not you give permission to have your voice recorded, then sign and print your name below.

- ❑ Yes, I give my permission to have my voice recorded
- ❑ No, I do not give my permission to have my voice recorded

Name (Printed): Signature: Date:

APPENDIX K

Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Parent

Table 19

Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Parent

IQ no.	Theory-question	Interview Question formulation
1		What made you start looking for a different school before you found Mountain Heights Academy? (specific event or general dissatisfaction?)
2	A. Why did you choose Mountain Heights Academy? (General dissatisfaction prompted family to do the hard work of finding something different)	Tell me how you decided that Mountain Heights was the school you wanted to attend? Describe the experience of the search process you went through before you decided on this school.
3		Think back to when you were looking at different schools. What three things did you like best about Mountain Heights Academy?
4	B. What has your experience been at this school?	Think about your time at this school over the past X years.
5		Tell me about your favorite school experience at this school?
6		Tell me about your least favorite school experience at this school?
7		If a friend asked you about your school, how would you describe it to them?
8		Describe your experiences with the IEP process. (Include information about putting the plan together, the actual meeting, and your experience with how the accommodations are implemented.)

APPENDIX L

Student Cover Letter—Interviews

Dear Student,

As a student at Mountain Heights Academy you have great insight into how our school works. Your willingness to be interviewed will help me understand your experiences and why you chose to come to our school.

I am interviewing a group of students and parents who have been at the school for at least one year. I want to find out why you decided to come to Mountain Heights Academy and how it is or is not working for you. This interview will take between 45 and 60 minutes to complete. If you spend a long time answering the questions it will take longer than if your answers are shorter.

As I write down what you said during the interview, I will send you an email with the interview questions and answers written out for you to look at. If anything does not look right I will change it so it looks more like what you meant it to say.

Your participation is up to you, meaning you can decide if you want to be interviewed or not. I will be asking a company to write out all of your answers to make it easier for me to study. Then I will ask two education experts to help me review all of the answers. Before anyone else sees your answers, your name will be changed so nobody except me will know who you are. The answers from this interview will only be used for my research in my doctorate program in a way that Brigham Young University and the Mountain Heights Academy Board of Directors is comfortable with. Quotes from your answers may be used as examples in journal articles about online students with disabilities or presentations at education conferences but your name will never be used.

Thank you for doing this interview. To thank you for your time you will receive a $25 gift card at the conclusion of the interview.

Your participation in the interview is voluntary. Your answers will be protected by changing the names and limiting identifying information about you or your child. The use of the data gathered in this survey will be limited to this project as authorized by Brigham Young University and the Mountain Heights Academy Board of Directors, although it may also be used in publications and conference presentations.

If you have questions or concerns, you may contact me at the number below, the Mountain Heights Academy Board of Directors, or my dissertation chair, Dr. Royce Kimmons at 801.422.7072 or roycekimmons@byu.edu.

Sincerely,

PhD Candidate
Brigham Young University
delainatonks@gmail.com
Principal, Mountain Heights Academy
dtonks@mountainheightsacademy.org
801.725.3396

APPENDIX M

Interview: Parental Permission Form for a Minor

Introduction

My name is DeLaina Tonks and I am a graduate student from Brigham Young University. I am conducting a research study about why students with disabilities and parents choose to come to Mountain Heights Academy and what your experience is like once you are here. I am inviting your child to take part in the research because he/she is a student who has attended Mountain Heights Academy for at least one year.

Procedures

If you agree to let your child participate in this research study, the following will occur:

- I will interview your child
- I will record the interview in order to transcribe it accurately
- I will ask questions about how they decided to come to this school and what they like about their experience here
- The interview will take between 45 and 60 minutes
- I will schedule a convenient time with you in advance.
- This will take place at the West Jordan office located at:
  9067 S. 1300 W. Suite 204 West Jordan, UT 84088.
- After the interview has been transcribed, I will email a copy of my interpretations to your student. If something doesn't sound right or didn't come across the way they meant it to, they can let me know and I will change it.

Risks

We think there are few risks to your child by being in the study, but some kids might become worried or sad because of some of the questions we ask. They don't have to answer any of the questions they don't want to answer.

They may be uncomfortable telling me if they don't like something about the school because I am the principal. Their grades cannot be changed based on what they say, and their enrollment at the school will not be changed either. There will not be any negative side effects at the school from sharing their personal experience whether it is positive or negative.

They might get bored, tired, or hungry. They can take a break anytime and we will have snacks and drinks available for them.

There may be a risk of loss of privacy, which the researcher will reduce by not using any real names or other identifiers in the written report.

Confidentiality

The researcher will also keep all data in a password protected file on a laptop that is also password protected. Only the researcher will have access to the data. At the end of the study, data will be kept on file for three years and then deleted.

Benefits

There are no direct benefits for your child's participation in this project.

Compensation

Each participant will receive a $25 gift card for participating.

Questions about the Research

Please direct any further questions about the study to DeLaina Tonks at 801.725.3396 or delainatonks@gmail.com. You may also contact my dissertation chair, Dr. Royce Kimmons, at 801.422.7072 or roycekimmons@byu.edu

Questions about your child's rights as a study participant or to submit comment or complaints about the study should be directed to the IRB Administrator, Brigham Young University, A-285 ASB, Provo, UT 84602. Call (801) 422-1461 or send emails to irb@byu.edu.

Participation

Participation in this research study is voluntary. You are free to decline to have your child participate in this research study. You may withdraw your child's participation at any point without affecting your child's grades, treatment, or standing at Mountain Heights Academy.

You have been given a copy of this consent form to keep.

If you want your child to be in this study, please check the box below on whether or not you give permission to have your child's voice recorded, then sign and print your name below. A company will listen to the voice recording and write down what your child says so I can review them while doing my study. Once they finish writing down your words, they will delete the recording. I will keep the recording of your child's voice on one laptop in a locked file for three years in case anyone needs to check my work. After that, the file will be permanently deleted.

- ❑ Yes, I give my permission to have my child's voice recorded
- ❑ No, I do not give my permission to have my child's voice recorded

Child's Name:
Parent Name: Signature: Date:

APPENDIX N

Interview: Youth Assent (15-17 years old)

What is this study about?

My name is DeLaina Tonks, and I am a student at Brigham Young University. I'm also your principal. I want to tell you about a research study I am doing. Your parents know we are talking with you about this study. This form will tell you about the study to help you decide whether or not you want to be in it. In this study we are trying to learn more about why students choose to come to Mountain Heights Academy and what their experience is like once they start. You are being asked to join the study because you have been a student at Mountain Heights Academy for at least one year.

What am I being asked to do?

If you decide you want to be in this study, this is what will happen:

1. You will come to the Mountain Heights Academy office.
2. We will talk for 45 minutes to an hour.
3. I will ask you eight questions about:
- why you decided to come to this school,
- what your other school was like
- what made you want to change to online school,
- what is working well at this school
-what is not working well for you here.
4. I will do a voice recording of the interview on my laptop so I can focus on talking with you, not on trying to take notes.
5. I will ask some follow up questions about your answers to make sure I understand what you are
saying.
6. After our conversation is written down, I will transcribe my understanding of it. I will send you a copy of it by email for review. If something doesn't sound right or didn't come across the way you meant it to, you can let me know and I will change it.

What are the benefits to me for taking part in this study?

We don't know if being in this study will help you. But we hope to learn something that will help other people someday.

Can anything bad happen to me if I am in this study?

We think there are few risks to you by being in the study, but some kids might become worried or sad because of some of the questions we ask. You don't have to answer any of the questions you don't want to answer.

You may be uncomfortable telling me if you don't like something about the school because I am the principal. Your grades cannot be changed based on what you say, and your attendance at the school will not be changed either. There will not be any negative side effects at the school for sharing your personal experience whether it is positive or negative.

You might get bored, tired, or hungry. You can take a break anytime and we will have snacks and drinks available for you.

Who will know I am in the study?

We won't tell anybody that you are in this study and everything you tell us and do will be private. Your parent may know that you took part in the study, but we won't tell them anything you said or did, either. When we tell other people or write articles about what we learned in the study, we won't include your name or that of anyone else who took part in the study.

Do I have to be in the study?

No, you don't. The choice is up to you. No one will get angry or upset if you don't want to do this. You can change your mind anytime if you decide you don't want to be in the study anymore. All you have to do is tell us.

What if I have questions?

If you have questions at any time, you can ask us and you can talk to your parents about the study. We will give you a copy of this form to keep. If you want to ask us questions about the study, contact Mrs. DeLaina Tonks at 801.725.3396 or delainatonks@gmail.com.

You will receive a $25 gift card today for being in this research study. Before you say yes to be in this study what questions do you have about it?

If you want to be in this study, please sign and print your name and check the box below on whether or not you give permission to have your voice recorded. A company will listen to the voice recording and write down your words so I can look at them while doing my study. Once they finish writing down your words, they will delete the recording. I will keep the recording of your voice on one laptop in a locked file for three years in case anyone needs to check my work. After that, the file will be permanently deleted.

- ❑ Yes, I give my permission to have my voice recorded
- ❑ No, I do not give my permission to have my voice recorded

Name (Printed): Signature Date:

APPENDIX O

Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Student

Table 20

Semi-Structured Interview Questions: Student

IQ no.	Theory-question	Interview Question formulation
1		What made you start looking for a different school before you found Mountain Heights Academy? (specific event or general dissatisfaction, something you didn't like?)
2	A. Why did you choose Mountain Heights Academy? (General dissatisfaction prompted family to do the hard work of finding something different)	Tell me how you decided that this school was the school you wanted to attend? Did you look at other schools?
3		Think back to when you were looking at different schools. What three things did you like best about Mountain Heights Academy?
4	B. What has your experience been at this school?	Think about your time at this school over the past X years.
5		Tell me about your favorite school experience here?
6		Tell me about your least favorite school experience here?
7		If a friend asked you about your school, how would you describe it to them?
8		Describe your experiences with your teachers (communication, assistance, how you work with them, IEP meeting if possible, or Directed Studies class)